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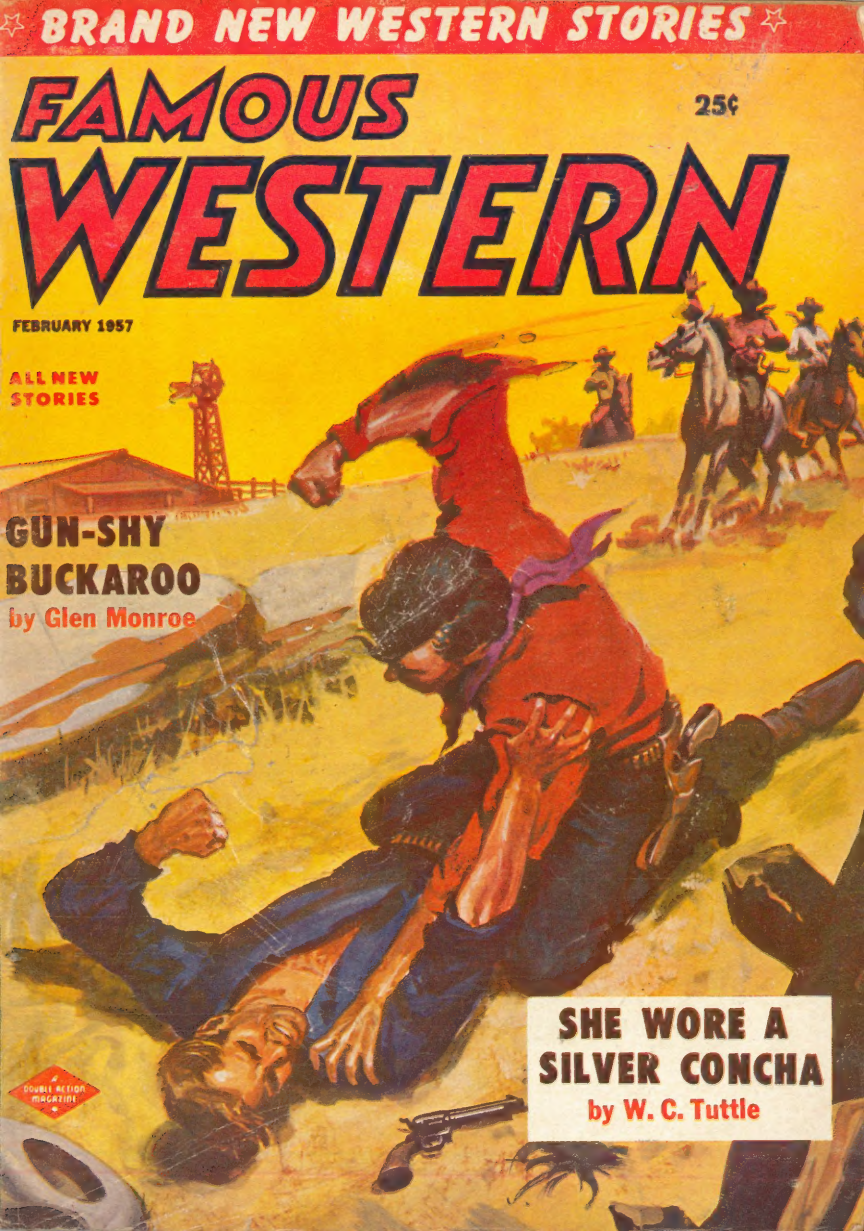

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by Glen Monroe

SHE WORE A SILVER CONCHA
by W. C. Tuttle

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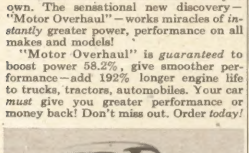

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FAMOUS WESTERN

Volume 18
Number 1
February,
1957

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

Featured Novel

GUN-SHY BUCKAROO

by Glen Monroe 6

Brad Garner had courage, but Westerners figured that the way a man showed courage was the way he faced guns. And gun-fighting was where Garner went to pieces ...

Short Stories and Features

DIGGER JOHN AND THE SCALPER ..... A. A. Baker 42

It was incredible—Digger John was being polite to the man who slugged him.

THE WEST IS STILL THE WEST (Special Feature) ..... Archie Joscelyn 50

Get away from the most-traveled roads, and you'll find that this Is true.

PEACEFUL AS BOOTHILL ..... J. J. Mathews 53

It was a beautiful valley—but those murdered men weren't at all pretty!

HE SAW THE LIGHT ..... E. E. Clement 64

There was nothing left of Eb Marshall's draw but the determination to try.

SHE WORE A SILVER CONCHA (Novelet) .....W. C. Tuttle 70

A broken concha was the only clue to the bushwhacker of old Frank Blair.

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE A. PARK, *Assoc. Editor*

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It made no difference that Brad Garner was one whale of a fighting man; he shied away from guns. And that made him yellow in the eyes of Westerners. But when a gent is pushed too far, sometimes he can forget mortal fear—particularly when the girl he loves is in danger.

GUN-SHY BUCKAROO

Featured Novel of Twisted Trails

by GLEN MONROE

BRAD GARNER had a bird's eye view of the whole thing. He saw the burly hombre leave his buckskin bronc unhitched outside the Cattlemen's Association Bank and saunter into the establishment with guns drawn. He saw the short, bandy-legged hombre who left his horse in a side alley to enter the bank from a rear door. And he saw the three wild-looking hombres who remained mounted, and with hands on butts, at positions handy to both doors.

The two men who'd entered the bank had neckerchiefs twisted wrong way round and pulled up to cover their faces. The three covering the building from the outside had wide floppy sombreros that covered them naturally without attracting attention from casual passers. There was no doubt about it. Those hombres hadn't gone into the bank to enquire about a loan.

Brad Garner knew all this, and watched the whole thing. He was close enough to see everything, too far away to interfere even if he'd wanted to. For the cowtown of Sunrise, Colorado, was in the very shadow of Long Ridge, and Brad was on the last slope of the ridge, on his way to town. He'd been riding leisurely, letting his rangy gray make his own pace, when he'd become interested in the movement about the bank. Now Garner was reined back on a sage-crowded butte, a little beyond and a little above Sunrise.

He didn't have to wait long. He heard shots cracking thinly, and saw the bandy hombre come running from the bank at the side door. Then the burly man burst from the front door, canvas bag in hand. The burly man held the bag in his left hand and one smoking sixgun in his right. As he ran he kept

The owlhooter roared with laughter as Brad danced desperately.

turning to throw shots at the doorway. The bandy man had mounted his horse and was loping out of the alley. The burly hombre turned from the bank to mount his buckskin; at the moment, a bank clerk appeared at the door behind him, gun in hand.

There were three shots in almost one continuous roar. The three waiting bandits had attended to the bank clerk and he fell without returning a shot. But men running from nearby saloons had joined the ruckus, and for brief moments it was like a war down there. Brad Garner saw the puffing guns and listened to the blasts as the five bandits kicked their mounts away. In a hail of lead they reached the end of the main street, where one of them fell from the saddle to roll in the dust.

Next moment, the robbers were riding hard along a trail to the south, in the shadow of Long Ridge. They passed sixty yards below Brad's position, a distance too great for sixgun shooting, even if the young Box K puncher had figured to do any shooting. Which he didn't. He wasn't anxious to mix with four wild-shooting bandits who would likely be expert lead-throwers. Brad himself was no expert; he hadn't had much practice. He watched the bandits out of sight, saw a ragged but well-meaning bunch of Sunrise citizens ride past in pursuit. After a decent interval, he kicked his grey horse down off the butte and loped into town.

Brad frowned at the scene there. The bank clerk was dead, riddled with bullets. Two citizens were wounded, the

town doctor attending to them in the street. There was a small group of citizens gathered about the dead bandit at the end of the street. Brad slid from his saddle to join them, nodding at a man he knew.

"Who is he?" he asked, jerking his head at the dead man.

"Dunno, son. A Mex, by the look o' him." The man spat in the dust. "Nobody around here seems to've seen him before. Waal, anyway, he won't bother us no more."

An oldtimer with wiry grey hair was searching the dead man. From the blood-stained shirt pocket he brought a tattered, folded-up sheet of paper. Obviously it was a "wanted" notice, torn from a post or tree a long time ago and carrried proudly ever since. On the old poster was a picture of two men, one of which was the dead one. Faded lettering announced five hundred dollars reward for the capture of the Lorente brother, Luis and Carlos, dead or alive.

"An' this guy is Carlos, huh?" Brad said, looking at the dead face. "Waal, looks like somebody earned himself half o' that reward anyway..." He chuckled.

Men glanced at Brad and didn't join him in the chuckle. He swung away abruptly, the smile still on his young face, but only because he was amused at himself for being out of tune with other folks. It was something that bothered him a lot. He lead his horse to the *Silver Saddle Saloon*, hitched him, and sauntered inside.

IT HAD been a long ride from the Box K, and the day had been hot and dry. Now, at sundown, the *Silver Saddle* would have been inviting enough, even without the prospect of seeing Carol Judd. Her face, framed in her rich mop of red-gold hair, was what he looked for as he shouldered through the moderate crowd.

But he didn't see her; she wasn't at the piano where she spent much of her time to the unbounded admiration of her father's customers. And she wasn't at the cash desk where she usually officiated during the rush hours. Brad Garner was disappointed.

He reached the bar at last, caught Pop Judd's eye and was served with whisky. Pop was a middle-aged man with no hair on his head and little joy in his heart. He didn't look particularly pleased to see Garner; but then he never looked pleased to see anyone.

"Where's Carol?"

"Out," Pop said, scowling. "Hope she comes back danged soon. She knows I need her in the rush hour. Why she should wanta go helpin' every no-good weaklin'—"

"Such as?" Brad asked, still wanting to locate Carol.

"Such as that ol' fool Maundon," Pop growled. "He's sick again. An' of course she must go takin' him broth an' stuff, like she was responsible for him."

"That's the way she is," Brad said softly. "She figures it'd be kinda bad if nobody bothered about that ol' hermit."

"I know, I know," Pop said. "Wouldn't mind if he was here in town, like any sensible man. But why the hell he wants to live on his own in that damned mountain cabin..."

Brad worried about Carol. With bandits active around Sunrise, the wild hills west of town were no place for a lone girl to be wandering. He made up his mind that he would speak to her about it, at the same time knowing that when he saw her he might change his mind. It was always the same.

HE TOOK a long time to finish his drink, then called for another. Still Carol didn't arrive. It was dusk now. Pop Judd's hired hands lit a row of lanterns that hung from a rafter. But for Brad the saloon would still be a gloomy place until Carol came to light it with her loveliness.

He had just paid for his third whis-

key when it vanished from the bar in front of him.

Brad Garner glanced sideways at the tall, rawboned puncher who, having swiped his drink, was enjoying it leisurely, gazing ahead with studied innocence. Brad smelled trouble, and was conscious of the weight of the Colt forty-five at his right thigh. It was curious that he always felt that weight dragging at him in times of trouble.

There was a flush of anger in him but he got control of it. To Judd he said, "Another whisky, Pop."

"But I jus' gave you one..." Pop started to say.

"That was for my friend," Brad grinned. "Now I want one for myself. It ain't manners to let a friend drink alone, huh?"

The big cowboy swung his gaze to Brad and Brad smiled at him. There was a sneer on the puncher's face. "I'm no friend o' yours, Garner; don't try to drink with me."

"Wal, now, you can't be's particular as all that." Brad was nettled at the fact of this cowboy, a stranger, knowing who he was. Bitterly he reflected that Brad Garner and his peculiar ways had become known far and wide. He said, "You ain't so particular, seein' that you jus' stole my whisky. Me, now, I ain't got on objection to buyin' a drink for a broke saddlebum; but when that same jasper refuses my offer o' friendship...."

Slowly, the big cowpoke put down his drink, his face reddening. Pop Judd nervously pushed another whisky to Brad. The big hombre said, "Saddlebum? Is that what you called me?"

"That's what I called you."

"Then go for your gu—"

That was the moment Brad picked to hurl his whisky in the hombre's face, as the hombre clawed at his sixgun. Next moment, as the puncher howled at the sting of the liquor in his eyes, Garner threw a fist that caught him on the side of the head and spun him away.

Men scattered back as the big fellow stumbled, one hand flat on the floor to save himself, the other swinging his drawn gun in an arc to aim—

And that was the moment that Brad's swinging boot kicked the gun from the cowboy's grip to clatter it among tables and chairs at the other side of the saloon.

There was a cry of pain and rage from the cowboy, now sitting on the floor nursing shattered knuckles. And Garner, whose swift running kick had carried him past the big puncher, just slowed down to a normal walk and continued straight out of the saloon.

There was laughter behind him as the swingdoors closed. With the sweat cold on his face Brad swung to the saddle and walked his grey to the town corral. The dusk had given way to starlit night, and old Andy was always busy with a client in the corral. Brad heard his voice "Yeh, you sure missed all the excitement, Miss Judd. A whole heap o' bandits, there was. Fifteen at least, I figure. Got away with all the bank's money an' killed young Lucas. I hear tell they've done robbed every bank this side o' Smoke River—"

"Carol," Brad cut in, walking his horse into the corral. He could see the white of the girl's riding shirt as she

stood with Andy, the bulk of her horse near by. "Carol, I'm sure glad you're back. Was kinda worried 'bout you."

"Were you?"

He swung from his saddle and she peered at him in the dark. He couldn't see the provoking little half-smile on her lips, but he knew it was there. He said, "Them hills ain't no place for a lone gal—"

"Perhaps today it was the best place," she said, "what with all the gunplay and excitement in town."

It was the kind of logic she always used, baffling him. "Andy said that a bunch o' men had gone after the bandits. Didn't you go with them, Brad?"

"Wal, now, it weren't much good me goin'," Brad said easily. "Matter o' fact, weren't much good anyone goin'. Them bandits played their act jus' on sundown an' hit the breeze for the hills. What with the choppy country an' dusk comin' down kinda quick, the posse'd soon lose their trail, I figure."

"I see," Her tone suggested that she saw more than he'd intended. "Well, look after Roger for me, Andy. I've a notion his hind left hoof's bothering him again. He seems to be favoring it a little."

"I'll fix him up, Miss Judd. All he needs is a rub o'—"

"Bed down my grey for the night, too, Andy." Brad walked out of the corral with Carol.

"I'll see you home," he said, for want of something better to say. "These streets after dark—"

"Are full o' villains, like the trail in the hills," Carol cut in. "That's what I like about about the West, don't you? You never know what's going to happen next."

THERE WAS sarcasm in her voice but it didn't bother Garner. Folks were often sarcastic to him. He grinned and said. "Sometimes, what happens next ain't good. Then again, sometimes it's good. Like—"

"Like what?"

"Like lookin' at a poker hand that's full on aces, mebbe. Like comin' across a cool spring on a hot day in the hills. Or...like seein' a purty gal to set you dreamin'—"

"Dreaming?" she said, and he sensed her little half-smile again.

"Waal...there's no law against dreaming, I guess."

"Maybe not. Trouble is, a fellow can do a lot of it without getting anywhere." He put his hand on her arm, but she pulled away.

Brad sighed. "All right...if I can't interest you one way I'll have to do it another. I'll build myself a cabin in the hills an' live there alone an' get sick all the time—"

"Brad Garner, that's not funny!" Carol cried. "And anyway, it's none of your business if I take things to poor old Ted Maundon."

"I ain't sayin' it is. An' I think it's plumb fine o' you to do it, Carol."

"Nonsense! Now you're trying to softsoap me. It's only what any girl would do, after all."

There was a clatter of horses into the main street. The riders were grumbling bad-temperedly: as one passed

close, Brad called, "How'd the chase go, pard?"

"No good," the rider growled. "They made into the hills, an' what with dusk comin' and all, we didn't have a chance. Lost their trail."

The posse passed along and dismounted noisily at the *Silver Saddle Saloon*. Brad grinned in the dark. "I was right about that anyway, huh?"

Carol didn't answer. Together they strode along the boardwalk to the saloon. Brad went with her down a side alley to a private door, and before she went inside she paused for a moment and he could see her looking up at him.

In the dim light of a street lamp her face was soft and appealing. He wanted to kiss her. In another moment he would have. But she broke the spell, her voice unexpectedly soft and toned with secret depths.

"Goodnight . . . Brad," she said. Then she slipped inside, the door closing quickly behind her.

Brad walked away. She was like the desert wind that blew hot and cold. And he knew why.

It was no fault of his own. The fault was with people who couldn't understand him. They expected him to act like any other hombre, and he couldn't do that. He had his own idea about things, his own way of facing them—.

He saw a moving shadow on the boardwalk ahead. There was something furtive about it, he thought. He sensed danger . Without slackening his pace he stepped off the boardwalk and headed across the street and at an angle.

FROM THE corner of his eyes he saw the bulk of a man pressed back under an awning. He passed the position and stepped on to the other boardwalk. At that moment he saw another hombre lurking in the shadows of another building ahead and across. Two horses stood by, hitched to rails.

It seemed suspicious. Those two lurking figures were at each side of the Sunrise Stage Line Depot, and only hombres up to no good would be standing in the dark like that. But it was none of Garner's business. He walked on, heading for a rooming house where he might spend the night.

He went into a place called the Rider's Rest, and woke up the grizzled night clerk, he paid a dollar and got a key.

The room was on the first floor, at the front of the building, overlooking the street. He lit an oil lamp. Then he heard two six gun shots, crashing along the street. Then another.

He heard shouts and the clatter of hoofs. He ran to the window, threw it partly open. There was no blind or curtain, and the light from his high-hanging lamp threw its yellow glare down across the street. And he saw riders crashing along from the Stage Line Depot, headed out of town in a hail of lead.

There were four riders. He'd seen two men in the street, and guessed that the other two must have been inside the building, their horses perhaps in a side alley. The four of them were bunched together as they passed Brad's position.

Men on foot further back along the street were shouting. A lot of things happened together. As the riders passed, the light from Brad's window washed over them and he saw a burly figure astride a buckskin horse.

And the burly hombre saw Garner's figure shadowed against the lighted window, and threw a hurried shot at him.

The slug smashed the window above Brad's head and showered him with glass. Next moment the riders were past, clattering away to the south and out of town. A few citizens were leaping on horses and making a chase of it. A useless chase.

Brad Garner shook the splinters of glass from head and shoulders, and

went to sit on the bed. He was sweating badly and as he mopped his neckerchief at a small cut on his cheek, his hand trembled.

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MARSHAL COLBY was saying, "But I don't savvy this at all. It don't seem possible that it was the same gang. How d'you know it was?"

"I keep tellin' you," Brad Garner said. "One o' the hombres who robbed the bank was a burly fella on a buckskin hoss. An' last night as the Stage Depot robbers rode past, I saw the burly jasper on his buckskin, in the light from my window."

"But damn it," the lawman objected, "They'd just robbed the bank an' been chased outa town. Now you're tellin me that within a couple o' hours they was back in this same town robbin' the Stage Depot!"

"Why not? The posse'd given 'em up for lost in the hills. An' even if the chase, or the search, was still on, right here in town would be the last place you'd look for them bank robbers, huh? Pullin' a second quick job was kinda smart, with not much risk to it. There was no chance o' trailin' 'em far in the dark, nohow..." Brad chuckled, the audaciousness appealing to his sense of humor.

The lawman glared at him and said, "If you figure it's danged funny, I don't. An employee o' the Stage Company was killed."

"I'm right sorry 'bout that," Brad said. "But it don't make no difference to the way I see things. Your posse'd just come back, tired an' kinda discouraged, an' figurin' the robbers wouldn't ever be seen again. Instead o' which they struck again right away. That was right smart, an' kinda funny."

"I still ain't convinced, Garner. But thanks for the information, anyway. You—you didn't throw a shot back at that hombre on the buckskin, by any chance? The one that shot at you, I mean."

Brad said slowly, "No...no, I didn't."

The lawman smiled. He was a hawk-nosed hombre who could look mean and sneering without trying. And now he was trying. He flicked his glance at the Colt that was holstered in best gunslinger fashion, low at Brad's right thigh. He said, "They tell me you're kinda slow to use a gun, Garner. Wall, I'm right glad to hear it. Sure wish we had more law-abidin' citizens like you, that's all."

"Thanks." Brad grinned, and turned for the door.

Marshal Colby stopped him, the sneer in his voice as well as in his face. "Just a minute, Garner. There's something that puzzles me, kinda, puzzles a lotta folks, I guess. Mebbe you'll put me wise. What in hell d'you carry a gun for?"

Brad paused at the door. The smile faded from his face, then slowly flowed back to curve his lean mouth and light his eyes.

"I'm plumb gald you asked me that, Marshal. This Colt belonged to Billy-the-Kid, who was my Dad's second cousin. When Billy got knocked off, they found that he'd left the gun an' thirty bullets to my Dad, in his will. Not bein' a shootin' man, Dad never used the bullets. He passed the lot on to me. That's why I wear this gun; I've gotta."

The marshal's face was a dull red, but he was intrigued. He said, "Why've you gotta?"

"Dang it, Marshal, you wasn't listenin'. Thirty bullets, I said. Don't you know that a gunbelt only carries twenty-four? Then where in hell would I carry the other six if I didn't tote the gun as well?"

He walked out, chuckling and heard the lawman swearing behind the closed door. He headed for the general store.

THE REASON he'd come to the town was to put in an order for supplies for Bill Krale of the Box K. When that was done, he went to the *Silver Saddle*, had a drink and an unsatisfying talk with the ever-elusive Carol, and then hit the trail back to the ranch.

The Box K lay sixty miles to the northwest, and whether you cut across Long Ridge and the hills, or took the long way round them to the north, didn't matter much. Both ways meant a good six hours in the saddle, slow over the hills or fast around 'em. Brad went back the slow way.

But for once the solitude wasn't complete. On the far side of Long Ridge, among the bouldered draws and valleys, he heard voices.

Voices carried a long way in the hills, and these were arguing voices. Brad turned the grey's head toward the sound of them; and when only a muddle of rock and sage seemed to remain, he slid from the saddle.

Stroking his cayuse for silence, he heard a man say, "Forget it, Luis. We worked it once but—"

"But what, senor? You theenk eet cannot work again, no? The Sunrise folks not expect we come back the secon' time an' we surprise 'em, yes? Now the third time—so why not surprise em' they theenk we jus' not dare go back plenty thees time, yes?"

There was some laughter, but the first voice, harsh with the tone of authority, broke in. "I said forget it. Never stretch your luck too far, I say. An' what I say goes— unless you wanta argue 'bout that."

"No, no, amigo . . . you are the boss, sure. But—"

"But nothin'. We'll hole up for a while till they forget us. Then we'll strike again, but some place else. Always keep the Law guessin', I say. That's the way we'll work it—until the day we split up an'each go our own way with a stack o' dinero. Chuck, what about that bacon? Ain't it ready yet?"

"Come an' get it," a new voice said.

There was silence then, except for movement of feet and the crackle of a fire. Garner could see the blue smoke curling from a lower position at the far side of the rocks and sage. Leaving his cayuse, he worked his way deep into the cover and risked a look.

He saw three men, on a lower level, grouped about the fire, eating a midday meal. One was the burly hombre, a bull-necked man with youthfuly smooth skin and sandy hair, whom Brad had seen in the two raids.

Another was the slim, swarthy Mexican they called Luis. He was Luis Lorente, of course, brother of the man killed in Sunrise.

The third was a reckless-looking youngster, obviously the one they called Chuck, a well-built specimen who smiled all the while. It was a devil-may care smile, Brad thought, but it could be a dangerous one to an enemy.

BRAD WAS above the group and not far away. He could see everything. Three men. But where was the forth? He looked beyond the group and saw horses grazing, the saddles still on their backs. Four horses, the buckskin among them. Four horses and three men—.

"Don't make no sudden moves," a voice said in Garner's ear, and too late he knew about the fourth man. This one was a sentry, of course, keeping watch while his friends ate. Brad turned his head to look at narrow, vicious eyes and a broken nose. He saw the man's lips open to call a warning, and he sensed the movement of the free hand to relieve Brad of his Colt. And Garner acted.

Lightning fast, he acted. One hand chopped viciously at the wrist, where

a forty-five was held against his side; at the same moment, his head butted forward to crash the owlhoots face. The impact of heads hurt Brad, it stunned the bandit and silenced him for the moment. It stopped him from shooting, also. Brad's chopping hand on the wrist likely had something to do with that.

But safety depended on something more than stunning his enemy, and the young Box K puncher was quick to follow up with a blow at the man's chin. It dropped him—and the crash of the body in brittle sage brought the other three owlhoots to their feet.

Garner looked up at them. He darted back through the cover as bullets sang about his head, the shots echoing in the hills. He ran for the grey and was thankful he hadn't wandered.

They've gotta run back aways to to their hosses, he thought, an' then they've gotta climb the slope. Likely I'll beat 'em.

He leaped to the saddle and heeled his mount. He headed away north and heard shots blasting behind him. The bullets buzzed wide and high. He was a moving target, and the range was long. He looked back and saw the three owlhoots riding fast, the burly hombre on the buckskin leading.

He got the grey to a clear valley between ridges and drove him fast. Five minutes later, when he looked back, the owlhoots were still the same distance behind. It was clear that they had settled down for the chase. They hadn't stopped to look at their fallen sentry.

The grey was rangy and had stamina, but that buckskin seemed to be slowly gaining. In ten more minutes, Brad was sure that he was gaining. The buckskin had pulled right away from the other owlhoot horses. The chase went through timbered territory and out of it, then along a bald ridge. The other two bandits lost the trail altogether. Now it was just the burly hombre and Brad Garner, and from the difference in speed there was only one way it could end.

The threat of danger tingled Brad's spine as, at last, the big bandit reckoned himself close enough to open fire. Two shots rang out in steady succession, and the second didn't miss by much. That Colt at his thigh was dragging heavily, and young Garner was sweating from other causes than exertion.

He swung his mount left into a split in the hills. It gave him ten seconds of safety. Then a shot blasted and he felt the breath of death on his neck; he swung the grey right again, and plunged into the cover of boulders.

HE MADE good pace through the boulders. It was a winding, crazy course, so that the following bandit couldn't get a clear shot at him. Then Garner had an idea and, swinging his mount suddenly behind a high boulder, he hauled back on the reins.

The grey skidded to a stop, lifted high forelegs and pawed the air. At the other side of the boulder there was an obvious trail that went ahead for a short distance before swinging again. Brad heard the thunder of hoofs past the boulder as the owlhoot followed the natural trail. Brad grinned to himself. Then he heard the scream of the buckskin, the thud of falling bodies hitting the earth, and the swearing cry of a man.

Then there was silence. Brad didn't have to see the picture to know what happened. He kicked his mount toward a rocky ridge behind his big boulder, climbed it carefully, followed the slowly rising ridge, and came to a place overlooking the tragedy below.

It was tragedy for the buckskin, heaped there with a broken neck, and it was tragedy for the bandit, stranded in those hills without a horse. Brad looked down and saw the burly hombre staring

helplessly at the dead buckskin. Then as if he sensed that somebody was watching him, he looked up and saw Garner who was reined back about seventy feet above.

Instantly the big man lifted his six-gun, at the same time making a movement for cover. Then he realised that Brad was beyond the range of a forty-five, and so was he, and neither man had need of cover. He looked up at Garner and yelled, "Blast you! Who the hell are you? What was you snoopin' round our camp for?"

"What's it matter?" Brad yelled back. "I don't have to answer your questions nohow."

The hombre swore savagely. He spun his sixgun. He called, "I'd like to kill you. If you jus' come down off that ridge, I'll—"

"Ain't aimin' to. Jus' wanted to see whether you was killed in the fall; that's all. You weren't, which's a danged shame as far's law-abidin' folks are concerned. Waal...I'll be gettin' along. See you some time."

"Wait!" the owlhoot called. Even at the distance, Brad could see that he was eyeing the grey horse and scheming schemes to grab him. The big man said, "So you figure it's a shame I ain't dead, huh? Waal, why don't you do somethin' about it? You pack a gun, I see."

"I'll be gettin' along. Ain't got time to play games."

"That so?" A slow smile spread itself over the big, full face. "You sure it's time you're short of..or is it somethin' else?"

Brad grinned. It was a bitter grin. Hombres were all the same, he thought, they measured a man by his willingness to throw lead. He called out, "I'll remember you, mister, if we ever meet where the conditions kinda suit me."

He was booming his laughter as Brad rode away.

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IT WAS after sundown, a day later, and in the Box K bunkhouse Red Rawson held the floor as usual.

"...an' then this fella throws his red-eye in Mike's face, slams him with a windmill punch; kicks the gun outa the saloon like it was all in the day's work. Hell, it sounded funny the way Slim told it. An' all the time this fella's packin' a gun himself. Now...I wonder who he could've been—"

There was an awkward silence. The bunkhouse was occupied at the moment by Brad Garner, Red, and the Tilsey brothers. Red had told his story with enjoyment, having heard it from the foreman of a neighboring ranch.

But Red and the Tilseys were good hombres and his friends, so that Brad was able to take it with a grin. He said, "you know danged well who the hombre was, Red. If Slim told you the rest, then he sure told you that. Sure, I had a little excitement in Sunrise. An' out of it, too."

Red Rawson rolled a smoke, wrinkled his snub nose. He said, slowly, "That fella Mike's a tough jasper. Big Mike, they call him, he rides for the Lazy L."

The cowboys were looking curiously at Garner. There was respect in their eyes. Roy Tilsey said, "I've noticed it before. You don't care how tough they come, Brad—so long's they ain't usin' a gun. Waal, that's your own business, I guess. But I'm always wonderin' why in hell you tote a gun."

"Ain't no mystery 'bout it," Brad said. "It's easier to tote a gun than not, that's all. I found out, fellas. A man can't be anythin' other than what he is

...but at least he can meet other folks halfway an' try to look like 'em."

"Here we go again," Ted Tilsey grinned. "This guy always likes to talk in riddles."

"I ain't meanin' to. What I'm sayin' is, every danged hombre in the West—except the oldtimers sunnin' their last days on verandahs, anyway—carries a gun. A man who don't carry one, he kinda advertises that he's no gunman. An' fellows get to thinkin' that he's yellow or somethin', an' they pick on him.

"Up till the time I was twenty I didn't tote a gun. An' I was always in trouble. Since comin' to Colorado an' packin' a gun, I've kinda cut down on trouble. But it won't last o' course. Already hombres are wakin' up to the fact that I won't use my gun, an' already they've got ideas 'bout me."

"I ain't," Red Rawson said quickly. He dragged at his smoke, threw it away with a snap of his fingers. "Anytime you wanta ride a rough trail, an' you want a pardner, I'll be right with you."

The Tilseys murmured their agreement, and then somebody changed the subject. But during the night, a fifth presence came to the bunkhouse. It came out of the night to stumble blindly at Brad Garner, a moaning, sobbing thing, with great bloody holes where the eyes should have been—

He sat up in bed, sweating badly. He didn't sleep any more after that, and even riding the range the next day, the dream still haunted him. It was a dream he'd had many times before.

THE BOX K was a large and prosperous outfit and Brad Garner was kept busy at his job, so that opportunities for visiting Carol Judd at Sunrise were few and far between. Three weeks went by with nothing to break the monotony. Brad became desperate to see Carol again, but had to contain himself until, beginning a month before spring roundup, the Box K punchers were allowed a week's holiday, in pairs.

Brad and Red Rawson went off to Sunrise together. Red had some relatives there and went to live with them. Brad booked in at the Riders' Rest as usual, but he lost no time getting to the *Silver Saddle Saloon*.

It was night. The place was crowded. Pop Judd and two assistant barkeeps were sliding the drinks. Men lined the bar and other men crowded about the card-tables, gambling or watching. Away to one end of the smoky room a piano tinkled. Brad pushed through and saw the golden shine of Carol's hair under the lights. He worked his way nearer. She was a picture, as always.

The only female in the place, but somehow it didn't matter. Put the average respectable girl in a saloon with rough hombres all around and she would lose something in stature. Not so with Carol. Put her in a room with a Boston sewing circle if you liked, or in a gambling palace, or up there in old Maundon's hermitage feeding him broth and stuff—she was still Carol Judd. It was just one of many things Brad Garner understood perfectly, but which he would have found difficult to explain to anyone else. He got close to her and was trying to catch her eye, when there was a commotion at the door and Brad turned to see Marshal Colby pushing into the crowd.

Something had happened. The conversation lulled and Carol's piano-playing stopped as Colby held up his hands for attention.

"I wanta collect a posse!" he yelled. "The more, the better. Them danged owlhoots've struck again. They done held up the stage the other side o' Black Rock Canyon, killed the driver an' a passenger an' got away with a bank haul."

There was an excited murmur from the crowd, men flinging cards aside and throwing down the last of their drinks. The lawman went on.

"This time I'm gonna get 'em, if I have to stay out for a month. They're in the hills somewhere, I reckon. Got a hideout some place. Wal, I'm pullin' out in half an hour. Citizens who wanta help wipe out them bandit pests, gather at the corral in half an hour."

The Marshal walked out, and a crowd of men followed. In a few minutes there were only a few hombres left in the saloon. A few played cards, half a dozen still lined the bar. Pop Judd's usual scowl was noticeably blacker.

CAROL WAS looking at Garner. He smiled. She turned up her lips at the corners, as if it were a forced effort. "Hullo, Brad. Don't let me keep you."

"I ain't figurin' to go anywhere."

She turned back to the piano. Her fingers floated over the keys and made music. Brad didn't see anything in music, but she made more impression on him than anything he could remember in his twenty-two years.

The piece was finished at last and he was too honest to tell her that he'd enjoyed it. He said, "What're you doin' tomorrow? Me, I've got a hankerin' to go ridin'—with you."

She looked as if she might refuse. But after a long moment she changed her mind. She said, "Old Ted Maundon's no better. It's his old bones, I guess, paining in the cold. Likely he'll feel better in the Spring. But if you want to ride with me we'll go up to his cabin. I'll bring him some fruit."

"Fine, what time d'you wanta pull out?"

"Any time. Ten, maybe."

"Fine. I'll have your hoss ready. An' meanwhile..." Brad grinned. "Meanwhile, there's a right purty moon tonight. You feel like a stroll? Looks like your Dad ain't gonna need you here."

Carol looked at him, searching his face for something and not finding it. She shrugged. "There's a lot of activity out there tonight." She jerked her head streetward, where voices were raised in excited talk and the clatter of hoofs sounded toward the corral meeting-place. "Men getting ready to do a job. Let's not clutter it up."

She smiled weakly at him and as she moved away to the rear of the building, he felt as if he'd lost her forever.

Only, he hadn't. She'd promised to ride with him tomorrow. It was something, anyway. Maybe he would have a chance of talking to her out in the hills, a chance of making her understand how it was with a fellow who dreamed of eyeless terrors whenever he went to sleep with the subject of guns on his mind.

Out on the street, the posse passed him—the biggest posse he'd ever seen go out of Sunrise. Sixty men, maybe. In the wash of light from a window he glimpsed Red Dawson among them. He called, but Red didn't hear.

He liked Red. An honest soul and generous enough to share his last cigaret. A popular fellow. Good-looking, too, with gals ready to come to him at the flip of a finger. Yet Garner had seen him go white at sight of a rattlesnake.

That was all right with Brad. Every man was afraid of something. Snakes were pure horror to some folks. Brad had once known a devil-may-care rodeo-rider who couldn't bear to look over a high cliff. The rodeo-rider was married to a pretty gal who thought he was king of the world: and Red could get any gal he wanted at the drop of a hat. But nobody thought much of a guy whose pet aversion was guns. It was kind of loco when you thought about it.

THE MORNING was sunny, a touch of spring warmth in it. Brad had breakfast at the Rest, wrote some

letters to folks back home in the Pecos Basin, then went to the town corral.

"Hi," old Andy greeted him. "Wal, now, I figured all the young bucks had gone with the posse. Weren't you in town last night, young fella?"

"Sure was," Brad said easily. "But I'm on holidays."

He left the old keeper scratching his head. Saddling up Carol's horse and his own, he thought: *I can't take much more of this. The whole time figures me for a yellow skunk. If it weren't for Carol, I'd figure it was time I moved on again...*

The horses were ready and there was some time to kill. Slowly he walked the cayuses to the *Silver Saddle.* He hitched them outside, and went in. At that hour it was empty except for Pop Judd, who was busy sorting bottles on a shelf behind the bar. The old man nodded shortly at Brad.

"Howdy. Carol tells me you're ridin' with her to Maundon's place. Look after her. Or mebbe you hadn't oughta go. What with them danged owlhoots runnin' wild an' Colby without the brains to catch 'em...mebbe you hadn't oughta go."

"It's up to Carol," Brad said. "Or mebbe it's up to you. You're her father. If you think she shouldn't go—"

"She'll go anyway," Pop growled. "that gal ain't heeded my advice since she got too big for me to belt. I jus' figured mebbe you could reason with her. Ask her not to go." Brad could see himself doing that. He said, "Reckon not. Likely she'd misunderstand my motive...an' you're lookin' at a fella who's plumb misunderstood enough already."

Carol came in from the street, carrying fruit she'd bought to take to Maundon. She wasn't yet dressed for riding. She said, "You're early. But I won't be a minute. I'll just go an' slip into my riding things..." She went through a doorway back of the bar, a hurrying girl with flushed cheeks and lovely enough to break a man's heart. Brad rolled a smoke waiting.

He heard hoofbeats passing the saloon. He heard voices. One of the voices sounded familiar; he'd heard it before. The thought passed idly through his mind, meaning nothing. He heard the sounds of men dismounting a little way along the street. Then there were footsteps of men parting, going in different directions.

There were footsteps on the boardwalk outside. A heavy tread. Into the saloon they came, and to the bar. Brad was leaning on the bar, smoking. He heard the newcomer order a whiskey from Pop Judd. Brad turned lazily to look at him, and at the same moment the hombre turned and the two men locked gazes.

Brad tensed with surprise and excitement. The hombre grinned at him, a bull-necked hombre with youthfully smooth face but with eyes that were old in experience.

"So...we meet again," Lock Mason said.

"Howdy," Brad said. He frowned. trying to figure it out. He said, "This town's the last place I figured we'd meet,"

"I'll bet, I'll bet."

He swallowed the drink Pop put down for him. He pushed the glass across the bar and said, "Another."

Brad felt the old warnings of danger pulsing through him. The six gun was a ton-weight at his thigh. But if trouble couldn't be avoided, then let it come soon. He saw Pop slide the second drink to Mason, and he opened the trouble.

"You're givin' your whiskey away, Pop," he said. "He won't pay you. Owlhoots don't pay for anythin'."

Pop blinked, and suddenly looked a little scared. Lock Mason swallowed the liquor and slid the glass away. He said, "Fill it again."

Pop looked doubtful, but only for a moment. He filled the glass. Mason said to Brad, "Owlhoot, you called me. I'm

a heap offended. But I could call you worse; I could call you..."

He stopped at the sound of a light footstep behind the bar. Carol had come from her room, ready for the ride. She sensed the deadly atmosphere at once. Lock Mason looked her up and down with insolent interest, then turned back to Brad.

"I could call you a yellow polecat, an' I'd be right." The big hand was over the butt of the gun at his thigh, and Garner felt the horror flooding him. He sweated.

Mason laughed. He said, "Look at the fourflushin' gunman, folks. Totes a purty Colt, but don't ever use it. Not even when you call him a yellow polecat, he don't use it."

There was silence. Brad didn't dare look at Carol. He could hear her quick intake of breath, could imagine the scorn in her eyes. Desperately he sought a way to justify himself. He said, "This hombre calls himself Lock Mason. He's head o' the bandit gang who've twice raided Sunrise—an' likely this's another raid, cunningly pulled while the Marshal an' posse are combin' the hills lookin' for 'em."

"That don't make any difference in you bein' a yellow—"

Quickly Brad broke into the splitting words of Mason. "This man lives by the gun. An' if I'm a coward for not drawin' mine, then he's a coward for tryin' to make me. Because he knows that he's too good for me...he knows I ain't got a chance. See what I mean?"

It was clear enough to Brad himself, but maybe not to Carol. He heard her sigh wearily. Mason laughed. "All right, smart jasper," he said. "if you won't draw...then dance!"

Like a striking rattler his right hand moved. The forty-five came out and the vicious bark of it thundered in the room. A slug hit savegely at the wooden floor close to Brad's feet. With natural reaction he leaped aside. But a second slug tore at the floor before he could regain balance, then a third and fourth. With the hot slugs slamming close he stumbled clumsily. The owlhoot roared with laughter as Brad fell backward and landed in a sitting position. A fifth shot made him whip his hand off the floor, and a sixth put the fear of death in him as it ripped through the crown of his hat.

IT HAD ALL happened quickly. Now Mason was rumbling with laughter, standing there with the smoking six-gun in his hand. Brad's face was burning. He heard Carol make a choking, sobbing sound. He saw her run across the saloon, the knapsack of fruit slung over her shoulder.

"Carol," he cried, scrambling to his feet. "Carol...wait!"

She flashed out through the swing-doors. He heard the scrabble of hoof-beats as she mounted Roger and heeled away. He started to run for the door, but now Mason had drawn his second gun and was shooting again. "Dance, you polecat, dance!" he roared, peppering the saloon floor.

Brad's run faded to a clumsy stagger. The six shots crashed in quick succession, one clipping his left heel, another scorching the calf above it. He staggered against a card table. He heard Mason laugh again and something snapped in his brain. He saw Mason through a mad curtain of crimson, and he picked up the card table with maniacal strength and threw it.

Mason took the flung table across his big chest and he fell back, hard. On the floor the table came apart and the owlhoot was tangled up in the pieces. In that moment Brad Garner realised that both Mason's guns were empty and he dived at the hombre. Among the mess of table splinters and loose legs the men rolled, locked together and growling like animals.

Mason raked his gun barrel across Brad's face and Garner felt the warm blood flowing. His groping right hand

picked up a table-leg and he hammered it across the owlhoots gunhand. The gun went spinning across the floor. Brad threw the wood aside and gripped Mason's burly throat in both hands. He was on top and pressing down with a fury and hate he'd never known before. His blood from his gashed cheek splattered on the gurgling Mason's face. He felt Mason's legs wriggling and straining as the owlhoot tried to squirm out of the strangling grip. Brad grinned. "Dance! Dance....you polecat!"

Mason's face was turning blue and his eyes popped. The thick lips mouthed soundless curses. "I'll kill you," Brad said. "So help me...I'll kill you!"

There was a thunderclap close by and a stabbing, burning pain in the ball of his left shoulder. Brad was spun away as if by a giant hand. He crashed against the bar. He saw the swarthy grin of Luis Lorente at the doorway, and saw the flash of a second shot as the bullet splintered wood an inch from his head.

A third shot might have killed him if Mason, staggering to his feet and coughing his breath back, hadn't got in the way. Quick to take advantage of it, Brad rolled around the end of the bar. He heard the Mexican striding swiftly to the bar to finish him, but Garner, getting to his feet and keeping low, sprinted for the doorway behind the bar.

As he flashed through the doorway, bullets splintered the frame. He slammed the door shut behind him. There was a short passage and then a flight of stairs. The stairs climbed to the residence above the saloon, where Pop and Carol lived. Pop had disappeared from the saloon during shooting, and Brad didn't know where he was. There was no time to wonder. He heard the running tramp of boots on the stairs and he closed and barred a door behind him.

He was in a room and he saw daylight at a window. He threw open the window and scrambled out to an awning. He realised that he was over the boardwalk of the saloon, the street below. He heard the thumping of angry boots and gunbutts on the barred door behind. Then there was a shot that splintered wood. He worked his way along the awning until he was above his hitched and saddled horse.

It was a fairly long drop but he made it. He lost precious seconds unhitching the reins from the rail. Then he kicked the grey away to the south, as Luis Lorente and the raging Lock Mason threw shots from the window above.

One bullet whined close, but as the grey stepped out the bullets fell short. Brad rode at speed past a small general store where women and old men had gathered in a scared bunch. He flashed past the Sunrise branch of a trading bank and saw two owlhoots, the one called Chuck and the broken-nosed guy who'd caught Garner spying, backing out with blasting guns and with bags in their hands.

The man called Chuck threw a shot at Brad as he passed. The slug went wide. Riding hard, Brad risked a look back and saw the two owlhoots mount their waiting horses and turn in the other direction.

A MINUTE later Brad Garner was out of town and well along the winding trail toward Long Ridge. Beyond the ridge, to the southwest, there were the ever-higher layers of hills and a narrow trail that climbed them to Ted Maundon's cabin. Somewhere along that trail he hoped to catch up with Carol Judd.

He just had to. He had a heap of things to tell her. She'd run from the saloon shocked and disgusted at what she'd seen; but there was an explanation, and if he ever hoped to make her understand him, that horrible explanation would have to made.

Anxiously he scanned the distance ahead. He felt that she couldn't be too far along the trail yet. His fight with

Mason had been savage enough, but not long. A few minutes at the most. With that thought in mind he kicked the grey to its limit, hoping to catch sight of the girl any minute.

But the minutes passed, and he didn't see her. Then wiser caution came to him and he slowed his mount. At top speed he would only wear out the animal and maybe lose the girl altogether. He realized that in her sobbing anger, or perhaps fearing pursuit of the owlhoot Mason, Carol had burned the breeze out of town and put a lot of distance behind her while he was fighting Mason.

He rode the grey up the rugged slopes of Long Ridge and over it. The trail dipped across a wide coulee then climbed for the hills. It was rougher going than the other, southeast trail to the Box K. But it didn't matter. Brad apparently wasn't being chased, and now he was resigned to not finding Carol until Maundon's cabin was reached. He thought about the bandits, back there in Sunrise.

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LOCK MASON was a cunning hombre, Brad thought. And daring. The stage holdup had almost emptied Sunrise of men, as Mason had guessed it would. And while the marshal was leading his citizens in a search of the hills, Mason had taken the opportunity to again raid Sunrise.

And when the bandits pulled out again where would they vanish to? After each surprise job they holed out somewhere and were immune from Colby's efforts. Likely they had a hard-to-find spot deep in the hills and were comfortable there for long spells. But it was surprising that the posse-riders hadn't been able to locate it. Many of them, as he'd heard about Colby himself, had been raised in this corner of Colorado and knew the hills well.

The sun was high overhead and hot. Garner didn't feel too well. His left shoulder, under a shirt that was caked with dried blood, was throbbing badly; his gun-raked cheek was swollen and the gash aching. His head began to ache as well. He saw a stream and swung off the trail toward it.

The water was cool and soothing. The bullet that had gouged his shoulder hadn't lodged there, luckily. Brad bathed the wound and cleaned it as best he could. Using a clear pool along the stream as a mirror, he cleaned his swollen face. But his head ached worse and the sun seemed to hammer into his brain. He tried to get back on his saddle, but stumbled and fell. The fall landed him in the shade of a cottonwood and he lay there for awhile. The shade felt good.

He didn't mean to stay there for long. He didn't mean to fall asleep. Maybe he didn't; maybe he had a period of unconsciousness. But when he came alive he saw that the sun was halfway down the sky, its heat faded. Swearing at his weakness and the loss of time, he battled to his feet, shook the last dizziness from his still-aching head, and went unsteadily toward his grey cayuse that was grazing downstream.

Back in the saddle he began to feel better. In his body, anyway. But he was worried about Carol. Had she returned from Maundon's cabin, coming back along the hilly trail and missing Brad who'd pulled well away from it?

She might easily have done that; then again she might not. But it was no use guessing. Having come this far, he figured he might as well get back on that trail and continue to the cabin. He turned the grey away from the stream—

Then he reined back, tensed and alert. There were voices, and the sound of walking hoofbeats. He soon located them. A bunch of riders were climbing the trail! Brad realised it, and backed his horse to the cover of cottonwoods. He was just in time. Looking through low-hanging, leafy branches, he saw Lock Mason and his three owlhoot pardners pass along the trail.

Garner swore softly. He watched the riders continue leisurely up the trail and vanish over a rise. Now he sweated at the thought that Carol might run into the owlhoots on her return from Maundon's cabin. Desperately he hoped that she wouldn't.

He remembered the way Lock Mason had looked at her, back in the Silver Saddle Saloon.

NOW, AFTER fearing that he might have missed Carol on her return journey, he was hoping like hell that he had. He kicked his mount toward the trail, and swung to follow the bandits. They had passed in a close bunch, without the usual back-trail guard that moving lawbreakers usually employed, so that they must have felt confident that they weren't being followed from Sunrise. Brad was thankful for that. Now, if he was careful, he would be able to stick close to them, to be handy with whatever help he could give if they met Carol.

It slowed his progress to the cabin, for the owlhoots ahead were moving unhurriedly. He glimpsed them at odd moments and lost them beyond bends in the trail, or in sudden hollows, or over ridges. But they were never far ahead, except when he let them draw away for safety on the straight stretches.

He cursed their slowness.

For an hour, the tedious trailing went on; and still there'd been no sign of Carol. The hermit's cabin was maybe another hour's unhurried ride. Then Brad lost the trail

Not the plain, climbing trail, beaten flat with the *hoofs* of many horses; he was still on that. But the owlhoots had vanished. It took him some time to realise it, but the truth came to him as long minutes passed without a sign of the gang ahead.

They had left the trail, he knew at last. But he was no Indian; he hadn't noticed any "sign" at the turning-off place. Likely he'd passed it long ago, he thought. It was a relief, in a way, but a disappointment as well.

It was a relief because now, if Carol hadn't yet returned from the cabin, she wouldn't run into the bandits. But Brad felt that the girl must have returned long ago, to be sure of reaching town before dark. Likely she'd passed down the trail while he'd been unconscious under the cottonwood. That being so, he was plumb disappointed at losing the owlhoots' trail and the chance of locating their hideout.

At high parts of the remaining trail he scanned the surrounding hills, but never once was there a sign of the bandits. They seemed to have vanished completely. He gave up the search at last, kicked his mount to a lope along the trail, and reached the cabin a little before sundown.

It was a squat building made of half-logs, with a crazy stone chimney at one end. It nestled among towering pines on a shelf let into a hillside. Whisps of smoke trailed upward from the chimney and a grazing horse nearby was the only sign of life. But the presence of the horse indicated that Ted Maundon was at home. Likely he was still laid up with his sickness, Brad thought.

He hailed the cabin; there was no answer. He swung from his mount and called again, walking to the door and tapping it with the toe of a kicking

boot. The door swung a little way, unbarred. He pushed it open, walked in—and saw the old man sprawled in an ugly heap on the dirt floor.

Brad's first thought was that he'd been in his sickbed, had tried to leave it, and collapsed. The bearded oldtimer wore rumpled shirt and trousers, but his feet were bare. The worn and patched covers of his bunk, a few feet away, were rumpled wildly, some spilling over the side. Brad stepped close to the old man and bent low to peer at him. Then he saw the deathly whiteness of the bearded face—and the mess of blood-soaked shirt and floor beneath his thin body.

The hermit lay on his left side, his knees drawn up in pain, a short piece of stick clutched tightly in one stiffened fist. Brad turned him over and his body was cold to the touch. There was no pulse, no heartbeat. He'd been killed by two shots into the side of his chest. Murdered!

GARNER looked at the truth and it was hard to believe. Everything about the cabin spoke of poverty. The floor had never been boarded, the furniture was of makeshift boxes and rough bush timber. The clothes on the body were tattered and the bunk covers were old rags and soiled cornsacks sewn together. An ancient saddle with burst stitching cluttered a corner. It was plain that Ted Maundon's belongings had been few and poor. Why should anyone kill him?

Then Brad thought of Carol Judd. What of her? Had the hermit been killed since she left? Or had she arrived to find the dreadful sight and returned along the trail to town immediately—

Then Brad Garner saw something that froze his heart: Carol's knapsack! The one she'd carried the fruit in. It was on the edge of a packing-case table and tilted sideways with some fruit spilled across the table and on the floor below. He stared at it, cold with a fear he couldn't have named.

All he knew at first was that something was wrong here. Then he began to realise why. Carol wouldn't have left the knapsack; she would have emptied it, making her gift of fruit to the old man—and she would have taken the knapsack home again.

What had happened? He got to his feet, his own hurts and aching face forgotten in the vague sense of Carol's danger. He walked about the cabin. Then he was sure: Carol's wide sombrero, the one she'd worn as she'd run from the saloon, was there in the dust at the far side of the table. He stooped to look at it closely. There was dust spattered on top of the brim and the crown was squashed in. The hat had been trodden on.

Brad was sweating. All these things added up to something too fearful to think about. There'd been a struggle in here. The dead hermit, the upset fruit, the sombrero trampled on. No sign of Carol returning along the trail. Her horse not about anywhere. She'd been here all right, but she'd been taken away by force. Maybe she might forget to take her knapsack back with her, but she would never willingly set out to ride home, or anywhere else without her sombrero.

The truth was right there for Brad to see, and he raged at his helplessness. Where in hell did he start looking for her? Who'd taken her? He remembered the way that coyote Lock Mason had eyed her in the saloon—and he ran a hand wearily over his face.

Wait a minute, he told himself. *It couldn't have been Mason. It couldn't have been any of the bandits. They hadn't gone to the cabin.*

That much he could be sure of. Mason's gang had turned from the trail an hour's ride from the cabin. And they had been in town when

Brad had left, so they hadn't had time to make an earlier trip to the cabin.

But that knowledge was no help. What good was it to know who *hadn't* taken her? And how in hell did he go about finding who had? He walked about the cabin worriedly, seeking a clue, just some little thing to guide him.

His search brought him back to the dead Ted Maundon. He kneeled to feel the body again, trying to figure how long it had been dead. But he knew little about such things. He despaired. Then his gaze went back to the hermit's right fist, and the short stick that was clutched in it.

He'd wondered about it before. It was just a six-inch length of dry twig, probably used for some make-shift purpose about the cabin. Why was it in Maundon's hand? If he'd been holding it when he was shot at, why hadn't he dropped it? Unless—

Brad's gaze swung to the floor and he knew the answer. Of course! Maundon hadn't been holding the twig when attacked. He had picked it up afterwards, for a purpose! And he'd died while carrying out his purpose, the stick still clutched in his fist. Brad felt the excitement tremble in him. It was after sundown now and gloomy in the cabin. He had to find an oil lamp and light it before he could read the message on the dirt floor.

It wasn't much of a message, but in the flicker of the closely-held lantern he followed the scrawl. He made out a name, traced in wavering letters on the floor... *carol.*

With hammering heart the young puncher followed the next word. His earlier movements about the cabin had obliterated part of of it, but there was enough left to recognize as *judd.* Carol Judd, spelled without capitals in an unscholarly hand.

Eagerly he moved the lantern to take in another word scrawled under the first two. But again Brad's clumsy footsteps about the cabin had smudged part of the word and all he could read was... *col.*

Making a third line under that again, the last word was scratched. Or was it part of a word? Brad figured it was. Here, he thought, old Maundon's valiant effort had come to an end. He had died after writing *black*... the scrawled line trailing away weakly in a manner that suggested an unfinished job.

And that was all. But what did it mean?

Brad took it all in t o g e t h e r, and could make no sense of it.

carol judd col black.

BRAD LOOKED at it a n d swore. What the hell did it mean? The old hermit's ignorance of the niceties of writing made it a problem. Should there have been capital letters to the last two words? Did they make another name to go with Carol Judd's? Col Black?

Was that what the ol' boy tried to say, Garner asked himself. That Carol Judd had been taken away by some hombre called Col Black?

If so, who was Col Black? Brad had never heard of him. He beat a fist on the floor, baffled and worried.

He knew that while he pondered over the problem, Carol's danger was increasing. Every minute she was likely being taken further away from him by this.. this Col Black!

Only, it wasn't Col Black. Both words were unfinished. The end of each was missing. And suddenly it seemed to Brad that if he looked at that baffling scrawl for a whole week he still wouldn't know what it meant. He had to get the hell out of there, and do something. Pronto!

He left the cabin. He swung to his saddle and walked the grey about, trying to find signs of a recent departure. But the dusk was thickening

and even as he looked, he realised that he probably wouldn't know a fresh trail from an old one.

But there were just two ways of leaving the cabin, and he didn't need to be an Injun to know that. Unless you liked to plunge your cayuse into shrubbed, rocky woodland, you had to leave the cabin by either the downtrail to town or another narrow trail that snaked southward from the pines. Brad reasoned that the last place a kidnapper would head for would be a town. He turned his cayuse along the other trail and loped south.

And he lost no time. He kicked for speed, and the grey responded. Brad took risks along the winding, narrow track, but there wasn't much light left and he was willing to gamble everything in an effort to find Carol before night came down. And as he rode, anxiously scanning ahead, he grappled again with the problem of that puzzling message.

He tried to think of endings for the words *"col"* and *"black"*, but could hit on nothing that made sense. It seemed a pity that old Maundon's effort should fail. Brad tried to imagine what had happened back there in the cabin. It looked like Carol was there when some stranger arrived. Maybe the stranger, some no-good saddletramp, had annoyed the girl and Maundon had tried to stop him. The stranger then killed Maundon, carried off the girl, after which the hermit had tried to leave a message before he died. That seemed a likely explanation to Garner.

IT WAS NIGHT, and his journey along the hilltop trail had slowed to a walk. He would have been a mighty baffled hombre if the flare of a distant fire hadn't happened, to send his hopes soaring. He pushed on toward it.

He'd felt sure that the jasper who'd taken Carol had travelled by this southern trail, and the fire might easily prove his theory true. The fellow would have to camp sooner or later. Was that his campfire? It lay away to the distant left, and Brad hesitated to plunge his mount off the trail in the dark.

He'd been in this part of Colorado only a year, and was unfamiliar with the southern reaches of these hills. But as he moved further south, still hesitating to leave the trail, he realised that the fire was swinging slowly ahead and—across it meant that the fire was really quite close to the trail, which was curving in a huge semicircle along bald ridges.

It took a long time to ride that wide half-circle. Brad had been in the saddle for some hours since leaving the cabin, and he figured it must be around midnight now, or close. For that reason, the campfire puzzled him.

It was long past eating-time, and hombres generally let their fires die when eating was finished. But the reason for this one was just one of the things he meant to find out pronto.

With the fire only two hundred yards away, he dismounted. He hitched his grey to a tree at the side of the trail and went forward on foot. It was easy. The narrow trail was carpeted with dust to break his footfalls, and the way was clear because of a starry strip of sky that snaked between the bordering trees. He found that the fire was to the left of the trail, thirty yards or so. He slowed to a mere stealthy movement, trying for quietness among the brush. But he was no redskin, and the crackle of twigs underfoot made him sweat.

He got close enough at last to see that there were three men close to the fire. Two were rolled in blankets, another sat against a tree smoking a cigarette. All faced Brad's gaze, and the three masculine faces disappointed him. Surely this wasn't a false alarm! If Carol wasn't around, though, then it must be. He'd had a long ride and got nowhere—.

His clumsy boot snapped another twig and the hombre smoking the cigarette cocked his head, like he was listening. He peered toward where Brad hovered in the dark beyond the fireglow, pushing his floppy hat up and back to reveal a mop of wild red hair.

An then, of course, Brad recognised him. He was Red Rawson, of the Box K. A wave of helpless rage washed over Brad and he swore in his mind. This was no womansnatcher's camp. This was merely part of the giant Marshal's posse who were combing the hills for the bandits!

"Who's that?" Rawson called, still peering anxiously, one hand dropping to gun-butt. "I heard somethin'. Is that you, Marshal?"

Brad stepped out of cover and walked into the firelight, the other two hombres waking and sitting up to blink at him. Garner said, tonelessly. "Hi, Red. It's only me."

"Brad!" Red grinned. "I thought mebbe it was the Marshal come back. He's overdue, some. What're you doin' up here, pard?"

Brad sat wearily on a log. Red introduced his two companions, other citizen members of the posse but strangers to Garner. Brad said, "I'm lookin' for somebody. Figured this fire might be the answer. Seems like I'm on a bum trail. How long've you fellas been camped here?"

He was wondering whether they'd been there long enough to hear anyone passing along the trail close by. Somehow he just had to find a clue regarding Carol Judd.

Red Rawson shrugged, answering the question. "We've been here since dusk, pard. We split up with the Marshal back north aways. Said he'd catch up with us for the evenin' meal. Can't make out what's keepin' him. He only cut across to ol' Ted Maundon's cabin. Figured to ask the hermit whether he'd seen anythin' of them owlhoots....."

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IF THAT CASUAL statement was a surprise to Brad Garner, its effect on him was more than a surprise to Red. The stocky cowboy stared at him as Brad leaped to his feet, eyes gleaming savagely, one balled fist smacking the palm of his other hand. "Hell's bells! Now I savvy.. part of it, anyway..."

"Part o' what?" Red demanded. "What're you talkin' about?"

But little pieces of the mad jigsaw were falling into place, and Garner's brain was a riot of new thoughts and speculations. He got control of himself at last, to answer Red's question.

"Look," he said, "a plumb lotta things've happened since you posse-riders pulled outa Sunrise night before last..." and he went on to tell of the raid.

Red and his friends listened, and swore at the neat way they'd been tricked by the Mason gang. Then Red said, "But I still don't savvy what you mean by—"

"I'll plumb soon put you wise," Brad cut in. He told about Carol Judd's journey to the Maundon cabin, her disappearance and Maundon's death, and the unfinished message scrawled on the dirt floor of the cabin. Then he said, "Damn it, I never once thought o' that hawk-nosed lawman! Now I see it—"

"Hey...rein back a minute!" Red cried. "You ain't tryin' to tell us the Marshal killed ol' Maundon an' kidnapped the gal..." His voice broke into laughter, and the other two hombres joined in the merriment until... something in Brad's tensed face froze them to silence.

"Sufferin' gophers!" one hombre cried. "He means it!"

"I sure do!" Brad said. "Don't you see? You say that he split up with you to go to Maundon's cabin. And that's what the unfinished word is....col-something.. Colby!"

"It don't make sense," Red objected. "It jus' don't. Why in hell would the Marshal wanta kill Maundon? You've got it wrong, Brad. Mebbe Colby reached the ol' man just after the killer had gone but before Maundon was dead. He high-tailed it after the killer pronto. An' Maundon was tryin' to write that Colby was after the killer who'd took the gal, mebbe."

"That's plumb loco, Red. If the Marshal was hot in chase o' the killer there'd be no need for Maundon to leave a message. No...my way makes sense. There was *Carol Judd* writ in the dirt, then *Colby,* then something about *Black.* Carol was the ol' man's first thought. An' why not? She was a kind gal, his good friend. As he died he was frantic over the danger she was in, and all he could do was try to leave a message in case somebody happened along. Obvious, kinda, that he was tryin' to say that the gal was with Colby. Hell! If only he'd finished that *'black'* word, mebbe the whole message would've been clear."

Rawson looked at his two companions and they shook their heads. One of them said, "There's a better explanation, I reckon. If we could only hit on it. It's plumb certain Colby wouldn't have no reason to kill ol' Maundon. It's more plumb certain he wouldn't kidnap no woman. Colby hates women, didn't you know that?"

"I dunno anythin' about Marshal Colby except that I don't like him," Brad frowned in thought. "How come you fellas are separated from the rest o' the posse?"

"Colby split up the posse into small parties an' put 'em to combing the hills," Red said. "Good idea. I reckon."

"Mebbe. But it so happens that his own party comes nearest the Maundon cabin. An' when Colby decides to look in there, he goes alone. There's somethin' a heap queer about it all."

But he saw that the three posse men were still unconvinced. Garner felt desperate. If only he had a clue as to which way Colby had gone after leaving the cabin. If only Maundon had lived a moment longer and finished his message! *Black*...what?

"Red, that unfinished word. Try an' think, will you? You know this country an' its people better 'an I do. Who and what is black-somethin' around here?"

RED PONDERED, scratched his head. "Hell, I dunno. There's a storekeeper in town named Blackie Jones. Or there's the Blackbutt Mountains 'bout five hundred miles to the north. An' Black Rock Canyon, o' course. Cain't think of any other—"

"Black Rock Canyon!" Garner snapped his fingers, and swore. "Blast me for a fool o' course! It ain't far away, huh? Near where the stage was held up a couple o' days ago. Why in hell didn't I think of it—look, how do I get there in quicktime?"

"To Black Rock Canyon?" Red asked. "What d'you wanta go there for?"

"Don't you see? That message Carol Judd, Colby, Black Rock Canyon. That's where he's taken her. How do I get there?"

"You figurin' to start right away?"

"You don't think I'm gonna settle down for a good night's sleep while that gal's in danger, do you?"

Rawson shrugged. "All right. I still think you're loco. But once I told you that if you ever figured to ride a rough trail, I'd be with you. This's it, I reckon...." He grinned at the two men on the blankets. "If an' when the

Marshal gets back, give him my apologies. I'm desertin'."

Red swung away among the trees, brought a horse to the firelight and saddled up. Brad felt a warm glow of gratitude toward the puncher. Trying to find the Canyon in unfamiliar country at night would have been difficult, perhaps impossible. Red's help would be invaluable.

They rode back along the trail aways. Red said, "There's a place where we can leave the trail an' head due east, but it'll be tricky in the dark. Still, with ordinary luck, we should make the Canyon by dawn. Not that it'll be the end o' the ride, though."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that findin' Black Rock Canyon is easy enough, but findin' a gal in it is something else again. That great hole's mebbe four miles long an' a mile wide, an' plumb full o' timber an' boulders. It'll be like lookin' for a needle in a haystack, huh?"

"But anyway we'll be lookin'," Brad said. "It's plumb better than doin' nothing. An' when we find her...if that coyote Colby has harmed her... I'll kill him!" The weight of his Colt was there at his thigh, and he touched the butt. The old vision of the eyeless horror hovered in his mind, and the old chill of sickness flooded through him.

"Brad, like I said before, you're loco" Red laughed.

"You think so, huh?" Garner frowned in the dark. "Jus' tell me one thing. How come everybody's got so much faith in a lawman who don't ever seem to catch any criminals?"

"Colby does his best," Red said. "An' you can bet that when he does catch up with that bandit gang it'll be the finish of 'em. Colby's so mad at 'em he'll likely go in shootin', savin' the citizens the expense of a trial."

After a silence, he added, "Your theory's jus' too loco, Brad. Even if Colby ain't what he seems, he still wouldn't have reason to kill a harmless ol' hermit. An' he wouldn't be carryin' off no woman, on account o' he never has nothin' to do with women."

"Mebbe," Brad said. "But if for some reason he did kill Maundon, an' Carol Judd came along an' saw what he'd done...then likely he wouldn't let her go back to town to tell about it, huh?"

Red didn't talk about it any more. No matter how you looked at it, you still had to find a motive for the killing, and because there didn't seem to be any motive, the red-headed puncher was unconvinced. He led the way back along the trail for half an hour, then swung off to the east, Brad following closely.

RED HAD known what he was about, backing along the trail before turning off. For here the timber gave way to grassed and bouldered ridges, the shapes billowing away under the starlight, so that while the ground underhoof was sometimes tricky, the general direction couldn't be mistaken.

The going was slow. And because in many parts they had to ride one behind the other, the two men were mostly silent. Brad was beginning to feel the effects of a hectic day, his wounds aching, his brain clouding with sleepiness. He fought it.

A long hour later they came to a flat downslope of grass and rode side by side. Red said, "That gash on your cheek looked kinda bad back there. How'd you get it?"

Garner told him of the fight with Lock Mason, in the *Silver Saddle*. He told it all, and Red nodded in the dark. Then the stocky cowboy said slowly, "Sometimes...usin' a gun can get you outa a lotta trouble. I reckon ...I mean, the West's kinda wild, an' it pays a man to learn to use a gun..."

"It's all wrong," Brad said. "It shouldn't be. Guns are plain hell. When I was a younker o' fourteen, back in the Pecos Valley, my Dad got shot up in a saloon ruckus. I heard the shootin' from nearby. I saw folks millin' around the saloon. Then...then they kinda fell back...an' my Dad staggered outa there with both eyes shot out. He kinda walked a couple o' paces, kinda sobbin'...then he fell an' died. I ain't ever forgot it. I still dream about it; guns are hell, I tell you!"

Rawson was silent for a full minute. Then he said, "You know what? Once I saw a fella throwed from a wild bronc an' stomped on. He was a friend o' mine. One minute we was talkin' together, the next minute he was sprawled dead with his skull smashed in. I was sick for days after that. I figured I wouldn't ever ride again.

"But I did, o' course. Unless I wanted to become a town dude I danged well had to ride again. So I forced myself to do it. An' once in the saddle again I was jake. No fears, no nothin'..."

They rode until dawn greyed the east, and then, true to Red's estimation, they were on the western rim of Black Rock Canyon. In the early twilight it was a great black hole, like the world had fallen apart. Red Rawson said, "We ain't gonna attempt to go over the side till we can see what we're doin'. Anyways, it might be better to stay on the rim until mebbe we can spot movement or somethin'. Me, I'm hungry. Let's eat."

At the mention of something to eat, Brad realised his own hunger. He'd had nothing since the previous morning, hadn't thought about it. But now as Red doled out salt beef, biscuit, and water from his kit, Brad fell to with a will.

After that he felt much better. He lay back for a moment, resting while they waited for true daylight. He knew nothing more until he found Red shaking him in the first rays of sun-up.

"Damn it!" Garner muttered. "I fell asleep. I didn't mean—"

"Do you good," Red said. "But look...I've spotted something. Come an' have a look."

The sleepiness fell away like magic and he followed Red to the edge of the canyon-rim. Red had a pair of binoculars. He handed them to Brad and pointed northwest across and down. He said, "Near that pair o' rocky outcrops, at the foot o' the other canyonside. Men an' hosses. See 'em?"

Brad found them. He focused the glasses carefully and saw that there were four men and four horses nearby. They were more than a mile away, too far for identification. There was a spiral of smoke curling from a small fire. But the men were on their feet, leaning against rocks, like maybe they'd finished breakfast, were anxious to be on their way, but were waiting for somebody.

Red named it. "They're waitin' for someone, I reckon. Saddlepacks rolled up an' ready to move."

Brad nodded. He was disappointed. Those four were certainly men, there was no sign of the girl he looked for. He said, tonelessly, "Mebbe they're a posse-party, huh?"

"Reckon not. Colby gave each party its own area to search. But... but I can't remember that Black Rock Canyon came under his instructions."

IN TURNS, the two punchers scanned the canyon from end to end, but without finding any other sign of life except the vultures that glided about the cliffs. Meanwhile, the four hombres down near the twin outcrops still waited.

"Kinda patient hombres," Red murmured. "Mebbe it's a kinda arranged meetin'. Or mebbe they spotted somebody comin' their way an' they're fig-

urin' to find out his business. Hell!"

"Whats the matter?" Garner asked.

Red had swung the glasses to take in the canyon floor to the south, and he'd seen something. "Here's what they're waitin' for. Two riders. Take a look...you can glimpse 'em every now an' then, between the rocks an' stuff."

Brad took the glasses, sweeping the canyon. He caught a flash of movement and lost it. He waited. The movement appeared again, for just a moment, vanishing behind boulders. Garner said, tense with excitement, "Two riders...an' one of 'em's a woman, or I'm loco. Wait'll they come in sight again, then I'll—yeh! There they are, a man an' a gal. An' it's her! Red, so help me, it's Carol Judd. I can see her kinda reddish-gold hair shinin' in the sun. Anyway she's on a hoss the same color as Roger. Take a look."

By the time Rawson had taken the glasses the figures had vanished behind trees, but when he saw them again a minute later he said, "It sure looks like a gal. That's about all I can say."

"An' the hombre," Brad said. "Colby, d'you reckon?"

"At that distance he could be Colby or the mayor o' Boston, same as the gal could be Carol Judd or Calamity Jane."

"Let's go an' find out."

"Sure. But in a minute, huh? Let's see what happens when the two groups meet. Once we start down, they'll be outa sight for a lotta the time. We don't wanta lose 'em. Let's see which way they go first."

Brad saw the sense of that, impatient for action though he was. Down there on that timbered and bouldered floor it would be easy to lose their quarry altogether, if they didn't get a line on their movements. They waited, and soon the two riders reached the waiting four.

There was a lot of talk down there. It seemed to be among the men, the woman and her mount standing apart. "What kinda hoss was Colby riding?"

"A grey," Red answered. Then he grinned. "That busts your loco theory; the guy with the woman is on a brown."

Garner didn't know what to think. If that wasn't Colby, who was it? And what had Maundon's message meant? Impatiently he watched until the pow wow came to an end, the four original hombres swinging to their saddles. Then the four rode southward along the canyon floor, while the hombre and girl continued north.

"Let's go," Brad said then. "If it's Carol, at least we won't have any trouble getting her."

Already the two distant riders had vanished behind thick timber, and hurriedly Garner and Rawson swung to their mounts and headed down over the rim of the canyon. The slope was steep and easy by turns, firm and treacherous in ever-changing formations. There was a lot of black volcanic rock about, relics of a by-gone age. The canyon had been easy to name.

AT EACH layer of ridges, at every overhang, the two punchers scanned the floor, but they saw no further sign of the man and woman they sought. As they got lower down the canyon-side their hopes of a glimpse faded completely. The canyon floor was a broken place of fantastic rocky shapes and wild timber. But there was one good thing about it all. The twin rocky outcrops where the four riders had had their fire, were higher than anything else. They were like towers, and it was easy to keep headed in their direction.

Down off the slope they rode and across the broken floor toward the towers. The sun was well up in the sky by the time they were there. They

saw the smouldering remains of the fire, the marks of hoofs and boots in the dust, and the trail that snaked north-to-south. The punchers swung north.

Red looked at the winding strip of dust and figured that it was a much-used trail. "An' that's kinda surprisin'. Never thought anyone ever visited the canyon. Can't think why they would."

But Brad Garner had been doing a lot of thinking, and figured that he knew the answer. But he didn't say anything. He was too anxious for action, too impatient to get to Carol and help her. He kicked his grey to the lead and loped along that winding trail, alert for movement ahead. But there was none.

They rode for maybe four miles, the full length of the canyon, and then the trail petered out and there was only the great north wall, a solid barrier of cliff beyond which it was impossible to go. Red swore. "Where in hell did they disappear to? Damn it... they must've left the trail somewhere back aways. Let's go back, an' watch for hoofmarks leadin' off."

There was nothing to do but follow Red's advice. They loped south, looking for sign. For long minutes they saw none. Afterwards, Brad wondered what had made him lift his gaze from the trail to scan the cliffs away on his left. But he did, and blinked in surprise at what he saw up there. He reined back, motioning to Red.

Following his pointing hand, Rawson swore softly. On a cliff-top beyond boulders and trees there was a horse and rider. The horse was brown, like the one under the hombre who'd been with the woman. The hombre's clothes looked familiar, chaps and leather vest, dusty hat and red neckerchief. He rode his walking cayuse along the cliff, sixty feet above the canyon floor and two hundred yards from the trail. Red said, "How in hell did he get up there? An' where's the gal that was with him?"

"Let's have the glasses," said Brad.

Red handed them over. Brad got them focused and his face went tight. He handed Rawson the glasses. "You know that hombre?"

It didn't take Rawson long to decide. "I'll be a horned gopher! It's Marshal Colby! But that ain't his regular hoss."

"I've got that figured. You say Colby rides a grey, huh? Waal, outside the Maundon cabin yesterday there was a grey. Mebbe he went lame or somethin'. Colby changed mounts, took Maundon's an' left his own. It kinda looks like I was right, huh? It was Colby who killed the hermit, an' that gal he had with him was Carol!"

"Mebbe," Red said tightly. "But what's he done with her?"

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BRAD SAID grimly, "That is somethin' we'll danged soon find out. Let's go."

He kicked his horse away toward the cliff, Red following. Ahead and above, Colby disappeared. The cliff-top trail had apparently swung away from the edge, carrying the lawman out of sight.

Recklessly Garner swerved his mount in and out between boulders and timber. At the end of the two hundred yards he was faced with the solid cliff wall. He looked up and saw where it rose to its sixty-foot height, some distance beyond it the canyon-side-proper continuing the climb. He swore in baffled rage.

Rawson said, "There's gotta be another way up. Better do what we figured to do, ride south until we find where Colby an' the gal left the trail

in the first place. Come on, pard."

They went back to the trail and turned south once more. Looking back some time later, Brad saw Colby again, still alone, but now on a narrow trail climbing the canyonside-proper. He frowned.

"That lawman's headin' outa the canyon again. I don't savvy this, at all." Then he shrugged at his own pondering. "Not that it matters right now. Findin' Carol's the main thing."

"Here we are!" Red whooped. He reined back and pointed. At the left side of the trail, hoofmarks leading away were plain enough for even Brad to see. Red kicked his mount to follow them, while Garner trailed. After awhile Red said, "Doggone it, this trail's used a lot, too, by the looks of it. Pard...the way I see it, we're on the brink o' surprisin' discoveries, you an' I."

"I've been thinkin' along them lines for some time."

The trail began to climb. It edged the ever-higher layers of ground and snaked toward the cliff from the south. In ten minutes the two punchers reached the cliff-top and saw the trail along which Colby had ridden. And they saw something else.

It was a false cliff. From below it had looked like part of the canyonside, but it was really a narrow ridge of rock that curved to the canyonside, making a second little canyon, of gorge, within the walls. And down in the gorge there was a cabin.

A cabin! Down there among the wild brush and timber. Brad said, slowly, "That's where he left her. Carol! I mean. I wonder..." The sweat broke on his face and he couldn't bring himself to voice his fears.

"There's a trail down to it," Red pointed out. "That's the way they went down, an' it's the way Colby got back up here. Then he followed the curve o' the cliff to the canyon-side an' climbed."

Brad led the way to the trail that dropped into the gorge. It was easy. In a few minutes they were down in the gorge. It was kind of damp and depressing, like being shut in a small prison yard with high walls all around. The sun only reached halfway down the walls. The sky overhead was brightly blue in contrast to the black rock of the walls. The two men swung from their mounts and walked toward the cabin.

Their footfalls were the only sound. The gorge was a dead, still and silent place. Garner was afraid of what he might find. Then—

THE SHOT, in that walled-in space, was like cannon-fire. There was a cry from Red, and he pitched forward. Brad dropped to the ground among brush as a second shot thundered. He heard laughter from the cabin, and it was like none he'd ever heard before. It was like laughter in hell, Brad thought. He rolled close to Rawson, and said, "Red...pard...are you hit bad?"

"In the...the thigh." Red turned his face and it was white with pain. He ground out more words. "Looks like...you're on your own, Brad. I ...can't get up ..."

The laughter sounded again, chilling Brad. A shot smashed among the undergrowth to burn Brad's hat. He lay flat, breathing hard, trying to figure what to do next. Red was gasping with pain, but he was down behind a slab of rock and safe from further bullets at the moment.

He looked across the two feet of space between them and said to Brad, "He's shootin' from the cabin window. I...gotta glimpse o' him. Like a damned monkey, all grinnin' an' hairy. We should've known...they likely wouldn't leave the gal without a guard."

Brad Garner said, "I'll have to fix him first. Hang on, pard, an' I'll be

back." He began to snake toward the cabin, flat on his face like an Indian. But with less skill.

Every movement of the brush around him brought a shot. Slugs crashed close. But the cabin was nearer. He was making for its door. As he neared it, he tended to get out of range of the window. He realised it, and so did the shooter.

The shots stopped. A harsh, high-pitched voice yelled, "All right, stranger...come in if you wanta. But if you do I'll kill the gal. Listen to her..."

There was a screaming cry of agony. A girl's cry, sharp and beyond control. The harsh voice laughed its hellish laughter. "The doll don't like havin' her arm twisted. But I'm lettin' you know she's here, stranger, an' I ain't bluffin'. You come in here, I'll kill her pronto!"

Desperation drove Brad Garner, bodily and mentally. Quickly he snaked toward the cabin, heading for the window now. He reached the soft, damp ground under the window. He drew his Colt. His left hand closed on a weighty stone. Carefully he threw the stone so that it thudded on the ground close to the cabin door.

He raised himself quickly then, looking through the open window. He saw Carol Judd bound to a chair and a hairy, hunched man standing by with a gun at her head. The hombre had heard the noise of the stone outside the door and was looking that way.

He jabbed the gun-barrel close to Carol's red-gold hair and said, "Soon's that door opens I'll blow her purty head apart—"

Brad shot him. The Colt bucked in his hand, he saw a red hole bubbling at the hombre's side, and as the hombre turned to the window in dazed surprise Brad shot him again.

The second bullet smashed into the dirty-shirted chest, high. It crashed the man backwards to the floor, his gun clattering away. Carol Judd made a sobbing cry of relief.

"Brad...Brad Garner!"

Brad swung lithely through the window. If he never got any further with Carol, he thought, he would at least remember the way she looked at him now. He crossed to the sprawled hunchback and touched him with his boot. The fellow was still, dead or unconscious. Brad played safe and picked up the fallen gun, tucking it into his belt.

Outside, the wounded Red was calling: "Brad! What happened? You all right?"

"I'm fine," Brad called back. "The gal's here. Be out with you pronto, pard."

He went to Carol an untied her. She said, "I don't understand. How'd you get here? Why—"

"It's a long story," Brad said. "I've been trailin' you since yesterday. Tell you 'bout it later. We've gotta get outa here, pronto. You...you all right, Carol?"

"Yes," she breathed. "That...that outlaw marshal didn't harm me; but the others would have. Oh, Brad... I'm so glad you came."

"Where's your hoss?"

"Behind the cabin, I think."

"Then go get him, while I try an' do somethin' for Red Rawson. He's been hit bad. I've gotta figure a way to get him outa here."

THEY LEFT the cabin, where the unshaven hunchback still lay motionless. Brad found Red Rawson sitting up. He'd plugged his wound with a neckerchief and stopped most of the bleeding, but he couldn't stand. The bullet had lodged in his thigh.

Garner said, "Reckon you can stick in the saddle if I hoist you there, pard? We'd plumb better get outa this place before somebody finds us here."

"You get me in the saddle," Red said. "I'll stick there."

Carol came back with her horse Roger. She knew Red, had often seen him in her father's saloon. She looked at the wound, said that she knew something about doctoring and would take out the bullet at the first chance.

"Fine," Red grinned toughly. "Thanks, Miss Carol. But right now we'd better hit the breeze, huh?"

Brad made ready to lift his friend. Then there was a mad cackle of laughter from the cabin. Carol went white. Brad stood up, and moved uncertainly toward the cabin. Wasn't that hunchback dead yet?

The hombre's harsh voice sounded. "Thought I was dead, huh? Waal, I ain't. Not yet. Will be in a minute. But I got time to...to fix the blasted lot o' you—"

Garner ran to the cabin. The wounded man had vanished from where he'd been sprawled. But there was a trail of blood leading to a walled-off room at one end. Brad strode across the cabin. He found the hunchback slumped across a queer-looking metal plunger that protruded from a small box.

"Jus' got time to...fix you," he muttered, looking back at Brad. "Me, I ain't ever gonna leave this gorge nohow...so I got nothin' to lose. Here goes."

Before Brad could stop him he heaved down on the plunger. There was a queer, rumbling sound, like thunder. Then the hunchback died.

Brad didn't understand. He stood there, uncertainly. The echoes of that rumbling blast were rolling around in the gorge. He heard Carol Judd cry out in fear and amazement. He ran from the cabin.

He hurtled out through the door and then he was choking in the dust. It was like a mist, filling the gorge. He could hear the patter of small stones hitting the earth, like hail. Coughing, shielding his head with his arms to protect himself from falling debris, he staggered to where he'd left Red and Carol.

"The trail!" Red cried. "It's gone. Blown clean away!"

Still Brad didn't understand, until, the dust beginning to settle, the sides of the gorge became visible again and he saw what Red meant. He stared, the truth hitting him suddenly.

THE NARROW trail by which they'd entered the gorge from the top of the false cliff was gone. It had been cut into the steep side of the gorge, where now only a sheer fall of rock and rubble remained. It meant that getting out of this place was going to be danged difficult, even if possible. They were now trapped in a vast pit with high walls all around.

"I don't understand," Carol said softly. "How'd it happen?"

"The hunchback, he blew up the trail. It was wired an' charged with dynamite...an' seein' that he was dying anyway, he figured to trap us in this gorge to starve."

He looked at the scarred side of the gorge and saw a part of it slide, settle, then slide again. "When that rubble finally quits movin', I'll try an' find a way up."

Red Rawson frowned. "But how come the trail was charged, ready for blowing?"

"It's an old trick used by outlaws," Brad said. "They find 'emselves a hideout an' make the entrance ready to blow sky high if an' when justice catches up with 'em. Me, I've got this whole thing figured, I reckon. But I guess Miss Carol knows more. Mebbe she'd like to tell it."

"Yes—" the girl said slowly. "It's ...incredible. I thought Marshal Colby was an honest lawman; so did everybody. I never heard a word said against him, which shows how clever he's been, I suppose. An' maybe he's been lucky as well...until yesterday, when I blundered in on him just after

he'd killed poor Ted Maundon. I say 'killed,' though the hermit was still breathing when we left. But he had to die, he was hurt so badly. If Colby hadn't been so cruel he'd have finished him off and ended his pain."

"But why'd he wanta kill Maundon?" Red asked. "He left the posse to go ask Maundon if he'd seen anythin' of the owlhoots—"

"Not really," the girl said. "He didn't want to find the owlhoot gang. He was working for them."

"I figured that much," Brad said. "He always put on a mighty act o' wantin' to catch them bandits but no matter where he led a posse to, the bandits were always some place else. It was all arranged o' course. But, like Red, I'm kinda puzzled about why he killed Maundon. D'you know, Carol?"

The girl nodded.

"Yes. But look, mebbe if I tell it all quickly, right from the start. I went to the hermit's cabin with fruit, as you know. Just as I approached the place I heard a shot, and a cry of pain. I saw the saddled horse outside the cabin, as well as Maundon's horse. I was frightened. I reined back. Roger stumbled on the loose ground and the noise brought Marshal Colby from the cabin.

"I was relieved to see him. I dismounted and went to him. There were terrible groans coming from the cabin. I asked what had happened. Then I ran into the cabin, but Colby came after me. Suddenly I knew what had happened, and he knew I knew. We fought. But he was too strong, of course. He tied my hands, put me back on Roger and took me away.

"He was kind of silent. I kept asking him where he was taking me. He said, once, 'where you won't be able to tell tales'. He wouldn't say any more. But I wondered why he hadn't simply shot me, like he had Maundon.

"Anyway we reached Black Rock Canyon. When we were dipping into it he spotted four men on the canyon floor. He said something about the boys getting in late. He signalled to them and they waited for us. I began to understand that they were the bandit gang. The leader was a man named Lock Mason...the man who—" She looked at Brad.

"I know," he said.

"Well, it seemed that they'd reached the canyon late at night and had camped. They'd been tired, and anyway they hadn't wanted to risk this trail into the gorge in the dark. So they'd waited for morning. But Colby told them something quietly and it seemed to change their plans. I caught the words 'stage' and 'special mail'. The four bandits left the canyon, to do another job, I guess. But I knew they would be back, and I was terrified. There was a grinning Mexican...and that Lock Mason leering at me.

"ANYWAY, Colby brought me to the gorge. That—" she jerked her head at the cabin "—that horrible hunchback was there. Jimpy, they called him. I'd heard of him before. He's been living in the hills for years, was a bit queer in the head. And Colby said, 'Jimpy, I've fixed Maundon. Tellin' you that he'd stumbled on to the bandit's hideout while wanderin' the hills one day—that was plumb unluckiest thing he ever did.' Then he laughed, horribly. He said, 'Wal, he got his wish. He met you one day near his cabin, told you to tell the Marshal to go to his cabin. So I did just that—'

"Then," Carol went on, "he said, 'Jimpy, we've got a prisoner. Her ol' man owns the biggest saloon in town an' likely he'll pay plenty to get her back. So guard her good.' Then they tied me to the chair and Colby went off, saying something about he had to keep his posse searching the hills while Mason's boys held up the stage

on the open trail...Oh, I hated him! He thought he was so very clever—"

She paused, looked at Garner curiously. Then she said, "I was dreading the return of the bandits. I was frightened of Jimpy, too. He just sat staring and grinning at me. Then he heard you coming downtrail into the gorge ...gosh, Brad, how on earth did you find me?"

Brad smiled. "Reckon Colby did himself a bad turn when he left the hermit to die in pain instead o' finishin' him off. Maundon scratched a kinda message on the floor o' the cabin. I went there lookin' for you, saw the message, an' met up with Red later. Look, Carol, reckon you can do somethin' about that bullet in his leg, while I kinda try an' find a way outa this gorge?"

"Yes," Carol said. "There'll be water and rag in the cabin, I expect." She hurried to the cabin.

Red said, "I figure we're trapped, pard. Them cliff walls don't look so friendly. But it works both ways. I mean, we can't get out, but when the gang gets back they can't get at us either. We're outa sixgun range from the top o' the cliffs. An' even if they've got rifles, we can shelter in the cabin."

"Mebbe," Brad said. "But we'd starve sooner or later. Food an' water can only last so long, no matter how much of it's stored in the cabin. No, Red, I figure we've gotta find a way out before they get back."

He looked at the blown side of the gorge. It was the most promising, despite the disappearance of the trail. The other cliff walls were of solid rock without footholds. Some were overhangs. But the blown side was jagged, and an active man just might find a way up. But Brad Garner knew that he would have to work quickly, before Mason's gang returned to camp on the cliff-tops and hold them trapped until they starved.

He went to the horses, collected the coiled ropes that hung from saddle-horns. He found more ropes about the cabin. Draping them about his neck, he went to the foot of the exploded cliff.

At first glance it seemed hopeless, the mass of rock and rubble towering almost sheer. It seemed to stretch away to the sky. Brad walked along the base, seeking a starting place. He found one, climbed a few feet, then ran out of footholds. Twice more he did the same, wasting time on false starts. Then he found a place where a slide of rubble made a treacherous slope to some solid, jagged rocks, and he started up.

IT WAS TOUGH climbing, and dangerous. The rubble often slid from under his feet and he clawed at it for support. There was always the risk, as he worked higher, that his weight would start another slide and he would go with it, to be buried in rubble. But the risk had to be taken. He struggled on, and long minutes later he reached the first solid rock, his fingers bleeding, his knees skinned through the ripped cloth of his trousers.

He got his feet firmly fixed on rock, and lay slightly forward against the steepness, resting awhile. He was sixty feet above the floor of the gorge. Turning his head he could see Red Rawson watching him. Smoke from the cabin chimney told him that Carol had made a fire, to heat water, and maybe a knife, for the removal of Red's bullet.

He could look at all that without feeling dizzy. It was more than some men could have done. But men weren't thought any the less of for that. It was only when your fear was of guns that they derided you. It was a danged funny world.

He climbed on. He took a crazy, dangerous path upward and to the left. Sometimes there was less than a ridge of rock to rest on. Sometimes

he had to grope with a foot to step across dangerous gaps, with no handholds, nothing except the weight of his body against the slight slope to keep him balanced. But he worked his way doggedly, gradually higher.

Once he slipped. A rock spike cracked off under his weight and he slithered, face and body skinning against the cliff until his feet luckily found a ledge. He heard Red cry out, away below. He had to work out another path from there. It wasn't easy.

He was sweating and bleeding. His breath came in sobbing gasps as he strained beyond normal strength. His muscles ached and sometimes they cramped. There were times when further progress seemed hopeless, and he would feel the cold breath of panic in him. He was now so high that he had to keep going—or fall. To turn back would be impossible. His strength might last until the top was reached, another thirty feet away now. But it would never last all the way down again.

He looked up and saw to his horror that he was under a slight overhang. He looked to the right and left, and both ways his progress was blocked by massive, vertical ridges of stone. With a chilled heart he realised that he'd worked his way into a kind of hollow from which it was impossible to escape. Unless—

It was his only chance. He looked up at that jutting overhang. Thirty feet above and partly behind his clinging body the overhang ended in a rocky point. He licked dry, trembling lips.

His feet rested on an inches-wide ledge. His body leaned flat, facing the cliff. Somehow he got one of the lariats from around his neck, careful not to push himself backward from the cliff and lose balance. Somehow he got the lasso held and coiled properly. Then he twisted his head to look at that overhang.

Cowpunching was his business, and he could throw a rope with the best. But this was kind of different. He would have to throw the danged rope upward and slightly behind, with a backhand motion.

And without any body movement, he reminded himself. Unless he remained flat against the cliff face he was lost. He made a few practice movements with his arms, testing how much swing he could use with safety. Away below he heard Rawson cry in horror. "No, Brad...no!"

That was all very well, but there was nothing else to do. Garner set himself. He threw the rope. The effort almost swayed him away from the cliff-face. He was upright for a moment, then he gently leaned forward and was safe again. And the rope had found a target. But only just, with nothing to spare.

He looked up. The noose was fast around the last six inches on the rocky point. It circled perhaps a foot-wide diameter of rock. He tested it carefully and it didn't slip. But when he let his whole weight on it, would that rocky point hold?

Grimly he thought. *That's somethin' I'll soon know!*

The rope was a tight line sloping at him from behind. He looped and knotted it about his body. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the comforting cliff-face away. He swung backwards, in space.

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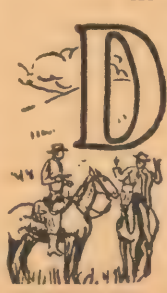

DOWN IN the gorge, Carol Judd screamed. Brad Garner, swinging in space, had a bad moment as he wondered whether there were any sharp edges that were liable to cut the rope. He swung back toward

the cliff face but not quite reaching it. He swung back again. The pendulum motion grew less.

The rope cut into his waist and he eased his weight by gripping with his fists and heaving upward. It would be a thirty-foot climb and there was nothing but the rope to cling to. If he didn't make it, he would die suspended in space, with the vultures pecking at him.

His muscles ached to bursting point before he got himself high enough up the rope to grip it between legs as well. Then it was a little easier. But not much. A man not in the pink of condition couldn't have done it. But Brad got that slender point of rock within hands' reach at last, hugging it and drawing himself on to it. For a moment he lay across it, gasping air into his tortured lungs. He'd made it.

A moment later he was on the solid cliff-edge, looking down into the gorge. Red Rawson and Carol were waving excitedly. He waved back. He took the other ropes from his shoulder and began knotting them so that they would reach the gorge bottom. Carefully he tested every knot, upon which the lives and safety of Carol and Red were going to depend.

He was ready at last. Down in the gorge, Carol had been bending over Red, working at his leg. Brad waited, giving her time to finish and himself to gather strength for his next task.

He saw Red walking at last, with Carol's help. His weight was bearing down on her and he limped badly, but Carol managed to get him to the foot of the cliff below where Brad waited. Brad had anchored the rope to a tree some distance back, and now he threw the rest of it over the side. It snaked down through space, and reached the bottom with feet to spare.

Brad looked over the edge, cupping hands to his mouth. He yelled, "Carol first. Red...loop the rope around her. Carol...try an' use your feet against the cliff, while I haul. Savvy?"

Bravely Carol waved, signalling that she understood. Brad knew how she must feel. Going up that cliff-side was no job for a girl.

Red knotted the rope about her and waved. He hopped away on one leg and sat down clumsily. Carol called, "I'm ready."

He had dropped the rope over the deepness at a different point, avoiding the overhang. At the place he'd chosen, Carol would have foot-contact with the cliff for most of the way. Digging his boots hard into the earth, Garner grasped the rope and walked slowly backward. Carol was only a slim young woman, but her weight on the rope was heavy enough.

The rope cut into his hands and he sweated. He walked backward to a tree-stump, hitched the taken-up rope to it, and took a breather. At the next haul the girl helped him more, having, at Red's yelled instructions, got the knack of using her feet against the cliff wall in a kind of vertical walk. Again Brad reached the stump, and hitched more rope to it.

About three more hauls would do it, he figured. Then all he had to do was haul up the stocky Red Rawson. It was a job he didn't dare think about, even though he would have Carol to help. Once more he hauled in a length of rope and hitched it. He went to the edge of the cliff, picked up the tightly strained rope, and walked back once more, leaning hard forward like a man in a tug-o'-war. He neared the stump—

THE SHOT rang near by and its bullet fanned him. Brad darted his gaze sideways and saw the mounted figure of the outlaw called Chuck. He had evidently descended the trail down the canyonside-proper, the one up which Colby had ridden earlier. And had been too busy to notice him. Now he sat his saddle, reckless

eyes taking in the unexpected scene. His gun smoked and he raised it, aiming. He was only twenty yards away. He fired.

The bullet burned a crease across Brad's ribs, but there was nothing he could do, with Carol's weight on the rope in his hands. Doggedly he strained toward the stump. If he let the rope go, the girl's weight might snap it.

He heard the man called Chuck yell, "Lock...Luis...get down here, pronto. Look what's goin' on!"

He had his gun aimed again, his horse moving about restlessly to baulk him. Brad looked beyond him and saw more horsemen dusting down the canyonside trail toward the cliff-top. Chuck fired; the slug burned his hat. Garner yelled. Don't shoot...there's a gal at the end o' this line—"

Chuck swore, and threw another shot.

That one chopped flesh from Brad's right arm. His strength trembled and he bit hard on the tearing pain, but he didn't let go the rope. In the red-blazing rage he thought of the girl dangling in space...and as another bullet took off the top of his hat he got the line hitched about the stump—

Then he dropped flat, rolled toward the enemy, coming on his left side with the rage still in his brain and his barking Colt in his right fist. It was Chuck's bad luck that just then his mount stopped prancing and he made an easy target. With a kind of raging surprise Garner saw the red in Chuck's cheek. The outlaw was dead when he hit the ground.

Brad saw the other horsemen coming off the foot of the trail. There were three of them in a bunch. The heavy Lock Mason was yelling, "What the hell's this?"

Brad was flat on the ground. He snaked to the fallen Chuck and took his gun. For the moment he was out of sight of the other owlhoots as they loped their mounts along the cliff-top. And the cowboy's mind worked quickly.

The girl he loved was helpless at the end of a swinging rope, and if those hombres ever got hold of her...The thought fired his rage again and he thought: *The odds are against me, but what the hell!*

Suddenly he stood up, in full view, both guns blasting.

He wasn't a good shot, but the targets were rushing headlong, and they were close. A bullet smashed into a horse's chest and it fell, throwing its rider, who rolled behind rocks, while his gun clattered in another direction.

But at the same time another of Garner's bullets had smashed a bandit's gunhand, and he screamed like a woman. A bullet from among the scrabbling, reined-back horses bored high into Brad's shoulder. It spun him away.

But neither led nor pain could subdue him while Carol hung there in danger, and doggedly he crouched, guns blasting. He emptied the dead Chucks's, and then his own, while from the screaming chaos the enemy

replied. Then suddenly there was silence, and the smoke cleared, and Brad Garner fought his sickness to look at the two dead bodies that sprawled at the hoofs of startled horses.

Yes, they were dead, all right; and now he had time to see who they were. The one with the smashed hand, who'd taken a second slug through the throat, was Luis Lorente. The other was the broken-nosed hombre who'd tangled with Brad the time he'd been spying on the gang. He had two bullet-holes high in the chest. Chuck made three. But what about Lock Mason?

BRAD TOSSED off his pain-filled dizziness to remember that first jasper whose horse had been killed from under him. He'd fallen among boulders and he'd lost his gun in the fall. Was he unconcious? Or was he playing cunning, staying low?

Red Rawson was yelling from the gorge and Carol was screaming at the end of her rope, but Brad's foggy mind had to concentrate on Lock Mason. While Mason lived, Garner was a danger; and Brad owed that hombre something.

He went stalking among the boulders, his eyes and hands busy. His eyes looked for Mason, his hands swiftly reloaded his gun with slugs from his gunbelt.

He found the outlaw chief. He lay flat on his back behind a rock. His eyes were wide open and his fleshy lips worked strangely. He said, "Don't shoot...I ain't got a gun. You can't shoot a man if he ain't got a gun, huh?"

He struggled to sit up. Brad spat in the dust. "You ain't so danged cocky. Not like you was las' time we tangled. Remember?" His gun menaced the big man.

"You can't plug a man who ain't got a gun," Mason repeated, and there was a strangely high-pitched note to his voice. He got to his feet and held his hands high. He said, "I'll go quiet... don't shoot—"

Then three things happened, all in a flash. Brad saw Mason's eyes widen a little, mirroring hope. A shadow fell across the slope of a rock at Brad's left. And Brad whirled with the speed of a striking rattlesnake, his gun crashing like thunder. For one brief moment Marshal Colby stared at him in stupid surprise, back there on a boulder overlooking the scene. The gun in the lawman's hand went off, but it was only a kind of muscular reaction to the shock of the bullet in his stomach. Brad got two more shots at him as he fell.

He whirled back and jerked Lock Mason's rush to a stop by clouting him in the face with a gun barrel. The big owlhoot yelped and staggered away clumsily, his face gushing blood. Brad followed up.

"You yellow polecat!" He raked with that gun barrel again. Mason blubbered, swaying backwards with his big face a mess of gashed flesh. "I've been waitin' for this."

Mason covered up, ducked low, sidestepped desperately as Brad followed. Brad was gun-whipping in cold, silent fury. The big man sobbed, pleaded, and finally raged. "Blast you! If I only had my gun....If only I had my gun—" He staggered about, his eyes from the mess of his ripped face frantically seeking his lost gun.

Brad laughed harshly. "I know what you'd do if you had your gun, Mason. You'd wanta make me dance, mebbe. Only I ain't the same hombre you played with in town, Mason. An' this time it's you who's gonna dance."

He fired at the owlhoot's feet, but he wasn't such a good shot; the slug bored clean through a foot instead of biting close. Mason gasped; his face screwed up in agony as he tottered away. Another shot burned his calf and he fell. He saw the gun aimed for a third shot and he scrambled up.

The shot blasted through boot leather to smash his toes. Mason lurched backward, his eyes wild with pain—

And he vanished over the edge of the gorge.

Brad Garner stood there, swaying with weakness, and listening to the horror-driven scream until the sickly thud at the bottom of the gorge ended it. After that he heard the softer, tearful scream of the hanging Carol, and again he fought away the sickness of pain.

But blood was soaking his clothes from several wounds, and he was weak and weary, his muscles like lead. With a frantic chill of panic he realised that he would never be able to haul Carol the rest of the way—

Then his gaze came to rest on the owlhoot horses that were scattered along the cliff-top, reins hanging. And he smiled.

They were all on the cliff-top, Carol, Red and Brad. They had picked a horse each. But before beginning the climb out of Black Rock Canyon, Carol said, "Seeing that the enemy have all been accounted for, there's no hurry to move, huh? Waal, there're water-canteens in these packs, and it looks like I'd better do some more doctoring. Brad...darling...you're a mess!"

Red hadn't said much. Now he looked at the scattered bodies all around and tipped back his hat to scratch his head. He said, "I wanta change somethin' I once said. From now on, if I figure to ride any rough trails, I'll ask you along."

"Sorry, pard," Brad grinned, his eyes caressing Carol, "but from now on I'm figuring to ride easy trails... an' I kinda have my pardner picked out—"

Carol's gaze came to his, and he had only to look into them to know that the pardner was willing.

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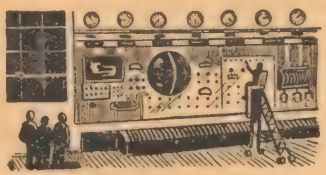

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The citizens of Gold Run couldn't believe their ears. Here was Digger John, swathed in bandages, openly saying he'd encountered a better man. And he was saying it to the gent who'd beaten him — to Scalper Loomis. And — could it be possible? — Digger John was calling Loomis *Mister*, and asking real humble-like, if he could team up with the scalper!

DIGGER JOHN AND THE SCALPER

by A. A. BAKER

THE HEAT blooming up from the Sacramento Valley buffeted against the summer shriveled forests of the Sierras and blanketed in the Gold Run Hydraulic Diggings. The soggy heat was a steaming barber's towel laid over the sweating back of Digger John, who was straining to adjust the footing of a roaring monitor.

The sun was pitiless, the gravel and sand blistering to Digger's touch. The stanchions bolted to the pipes were chattering and walking as the whipping pressure of the water was slashed against the wall of the mine. Digger, a huge man, sucked the salty sweat trickling down his red bristled jaw and spat in disgust. He straighted, the ropey muscles bunching across his shoulders as he whirled the six foot crowbar with his right hand, and flailed the timbered carriage of the Monitor. The bar sprang back, knocking his dirty black hat sideways onto his bushy black hair. His eyes, sunken under battered eyebrows, were built up by scar tissue until his forehead jutted and flashed as he ducked the crowbar.

"You got trouble, Friend?" The question, a sibilant hiss that even penetrated the water's roar, caused Digger to swing wrathfully about.

The speaker was a lean leathery man, dressed in a white cattleman's Stetson hat; a tasseled vest, black skintight pants that were creased carefully and stuffed in a pair of pointed Mexican boots. A brace of rim fire colts rested in grease smooth holsters against the long legs. The reins of a wall eyed roan were held in a hand the color of burnt leather. More hissing words coiled from the thin mouth. "C'n a fella water his hoss?"

"Have I got trouble!" Digger shouted. "It's 120 in the shade. The crew

Unbelievable! Digger John was calling this bully MISTER!

ain't come back off'n their Saturday drunk. That nozzle," he thrust a thumb at the thundering Monitor, "is eatin' into the flume trestle an' I come to work without no breakfast. A couple of Concow Injuns," he explained morosely, "snuck into my cabin an' cleaned me out!"

"But," Digger pointed to a bucket, "if you want to water your hoss, go ahead, Stranger."

"Name's Loomis," the stranger replied. He paused and the gray eyes faded as he continued his introduction. "Scalper Loomis, late of Arizona." With careful steps, Loomis ducked the nozzle, retrieved the bucket and raised the container toward the Hydraulic nozzle. Digger watched, smiling.

Loomis flipped the bucket. The roaring water hit the bottom with a thump and instantly flung bucket and Scalper Loomis, like a shirt, wind-torn from the wash line, out toward the trestle.

Digger John watched the man land, sprawling in a puddle of red mud. The bucket handle remained intact while the bucket flailed out on the orbit of water, a spinning reflection against the sun.

Loomis rose and walked back, recovering his hat from a muddy clay hump. Digger noticed that Loomis' blond hair was gathered in a knot and tied with a beaded chignon.

"That's *real* p r e s s u r e!" Digger shouted, pointing his finger, then

ducked down and retrieved his crowbar. "See, three thousand feet of water per minute at a speed of a hunert an' fifty foot per second. Like a solid iron eight inch bar. Watch..." The miner swung the bar, hitting the water, the crowbar bounced back. Digger grinned and again shouted. "Step back an' watch this bar." He held it lengthwise, letting it lie on the top of the stream; it shot forward and smashed into the far bank.

SCALPER LOOMIS sneered, barely moving his lips, his eyes immobile as he turned his head and followed the pipe line. Then he drew his twin Colts, and Digger ducked. But Loomis was taking his spite out on the pipe line; holes appeared and water sprayed over the pair. Loomis walked back, belled his Stetson out and caught it full, then let his roan drink and ignored the cursing Digger.

"Puncturin' the line!" Digger reached for Loomis, but the Colt was jammed into his ribs. The thin lips asked. "This your operation?"

"No, I work here, but ..."

"What'd you get paid?"

"Not enough," began Digger. "Gold on the market sells for seventeen dollar, in Gold Run we're lucky to get four dollars an ounce."

"Then don't be a damned fool." Loomis dropped the Colt hammer skillfully, the click sending a shudder through Digger's stomach. "Work with me, Friend. It'll mean maybe a hundred Mex dollars a day."

"Robbin' stages, or ...?"

"Nope." Loomis lifted his lips across stone white teeth and Digger felt he was watching a death's head. "Not robbin' stages. Scalpin' Injuns ..." Loomis paused. "It's legal—for bounty."

"Yeah, in Arizona!" snapped Digger. "But they eat dogs and gila monsters—in Arizona. An' breed critters like you ..."

"This'll teach you!" Scalper Loomis flipped his Colt, holding it by the eight inch barrel and smashed the butt into Digger's eye.

The miner staggered as blood gushed from the damaged socket. Loomis hammered again, raking the sharp hammer across Digger's face; opening a razor sharp wedge down the bristled cheek into the thumping vein on the wedge-like neck. Loomis stepped in close and raised his arm, shifting a narrow shoulder until the elbow was pointed upward; then without a change of expression Loomis jabbed Digger's Adam's Apple.

Digger John fell, feeling his windpipe contract, his lungs suck hopelessly for air, his chest raising in spasms. Through the red haze of his injured eye, Digger watched Loomis stoop over him and felt the long hot gun barrel laid along his temple. The trigger clicked and the roar of the cartridge seemed to tear off the top of his head. He felt that he was sinking through the gravel bed while his head was raising away from his body; that an army was marching through the expanded vault of his head with hob nail boots slipping on the dark red slopes of his bloodied skull. He never heard Scalper Loomis mount and ride off.

DIGGER JOHN came to on Dr. Gregory's leather couch. The shades had been drawn and the room was stifling in the evening heat. With careful hands he explored his wounds. A bandage circled his neck, crisscrossed along the back of his head and ended in a wad of gauze over his right eye. A lump, soaked with Dr. Gregory's special burn grease, rose along his temple. He winced and felt the congealed blood give. Then he opened his good eye and started to rise.

His head swum and a firm hand pressed him back. The soft voice grated harshly and started his temple throbbing.

"Lie still, Digger," Dr. Gregory said. "Lie there till I get you a drink."

"Shore, Doc. Pour it in the top of my head; them soldiers must be thirsty after all that marchin' . . ."

"You'll make it, John," jovially answered the doctor holding the fragrant liquor to Digger's lips. "I'd sure like to see the other guy. . . ."

"You're lookin' at him, Doc!" groaned the miner. "Pistol whipped, s t o m p e d—he done everythin' but stuff me fulla black powder an' light a short fuse."

"What happened?" asked the startled doctor.

"I talked when I should'a listened, Doc. Now let me outa here . . "

"Better rest," objected the doctor. "If you're going manhunting."

Digger John sat up on the rim of the couch, digesting Dr. Gregory's advice. If he found Scalper Loomis, what could he do against those strapped-down Colts? Digger had been in a thousand fights and come off top dog in most, but this Loomis was a real killer. Cold, calculating, and not caring if the souls he released went to heaven or hell. A brutal man who had lived a lifetime under the threat of death, until his heart and feelings had become as seared and dried as his sun-whipped skin. Skin laid over bones without flesh to be torn and tortured.

Digger John knew about Arizona bounty hunters. Squads of fighting men who ranged along the Mexican border. Riding their long legged horses into the domains of the Apaches and Pima Indians. The Chiricaua's, Mexcalero, Coyoteros; savages let loose out of hell to destroy the Missions of Tubac and Tamacacori, to kill and burn the rancheros. Interbred with the Spanish, absorbing the evil traits of both Indian and White. Matched only in ferocity by scalp hunters who reaped a harvest of Mexican dollars from the beleagured Don's of Chiuahua. Three hundred Mex dollars for a warrior's scalp, graded down through the squaws, dependent on ages, the children to be raised as Mexican slaves.

Digger knew this Scalper Loomis was the real McCoy. Pure rawhide, his brains wormy with hate. You could batter and smash fists against that body, but could you make him feel pain—or fear?

Digger John smashed one fist into the other and felt his head rock then looked into Dr. Gregory's eyes and softly asked. "Which is worse, Doc—pain or fear?"

"I can tell you about pain, Dig," answered the puzzled doctor. "You'll have to go to a minister to find out about fear."

"Yeah," grunted Digger; "but maybe Scalper Loomis can tell me the answer." The big miner rose and stalked out, making a beeline for *Dredger Dan's Saloon.*

The batwings, freshly oiled, snapped open as Digger jammed his way into the crowded barroom. The lamps blazed down on the usual evening assembly. Miners, seared by the long day in the Hydraulic mines, several drummers, velvet coats shiny, bucked Slim Deakins's roulette wheel. A spattering of local citzens were there and, in a cleared space as though the men were giving room to a rabid porcupine, Scalper Loomis faced Dredger Dan across the bar.

The bounty killer was holding a polished whiskey glass at eye level, his arm outstretched, until Dredger Dan drew his head backward.

"It's dirty, Saloonkeeper, see?" The glass whirled in the yellow flexing fingers. Loomis hacked and spat against the foot rail. "Cleanliness, Bartender," the thin lips hissed, "is one thing I dote on—understand?"

"Yes—siree." The fat saloon owner grabbed the glass and dipped in the trough under the bar then polished it with his beer stained apron. "There, Mr. Loomis, that better?"

"Now wipe the neck of the bottle, Saloon Man," Loomis ordered.

DIGGER JOHN shouldered through and stood squarely behind Scalper Loomis; waiting. Dredger Dan swiped the bottle neck and face red, spotted Digger.

"John?" Dan was tickled. "You tangle with a grizzly? Or you been cuttin' your hair with a buzzsaw again?"

"Neither," Digger answered flatly; "just run up against a better man's all."

Loomis let his frame relax and turned lazily to survey the bandages. A leer lifted his thin eyelids. "Lost my temper," he mimicked Dredger's voice, "John-nee boy. No hard feelin's, John-ee?"

"None atall," heartily agreed Digger John. "Been thinkin', Mister Loomis. That hunert Mex a day sounds interestin', mighty interestin'. 'Cept one leetle thing's botherin' me, Mister Loomis?"

Scalper Loomis raised his hand in assent for Digger to ask his question.

"Them scalps—S c a l p e r," Digger grinned fatuously. "Concow Injuns got stubby hair, like a scrub brush; ain't nothin' like Apache hair."

"Don Hernando Savell," explained Loomis expansively, "don't like *no* Injuns. If I tell him these Concows is related to Apaches, he'll pay on the barrel haid." He surveyed the room and watched with sardonic pleasure as the heads ducked. "C'n we recruit some of your friends hyar?"

Digger was shocked. "To scalp Concows? Shucks, you never killed no rabbits as meek." He lowered his bull voice confidently. "Anyways, there's no more'n enough for us, Scalper. Let's get outa here. We can stop by my place for my scalpin' knife an' can be most to Round Valley by mornin'. We'll catch 'em asleep." Digger elbowed his way out, the bounty hunter stepping stiffly through the path of silent patrons as he followed the big miner through the batwings.

A long silence followed their exit. Then a convulsive breath seemed to shake the barroom. "Did you hear *that?"* gasped Dredger Dan. *"Concows* meek as rabbits?"

"Touch one of *them,"* chuckled a miner, "an' it'd burn the meat offa your hand. An' old Liver Hoss is meaner'n a fumin' acid helt in a paper sack! And did you all hear Digger? The way he acted? Like he was afraid of that yella skinned gunslinger .. " He chortled. *"Mister* Loomis! Mister!"

"An' there not bein' *enough* Concows?" hooted Dredger. "Them two goin' into Round Valley—two against *five thousand!* Remind me to ask Doc if Dig's brains leaked out. Maybe he's sunstruck. Hooray! Drinks is on the house!" Dredger finished in a shout.

ROUND VALLEY, a mortar bowl of granite crisscrossed by the fingering trickles of water seepage; its bottom was a swampy mass of willows, fresh water tules and clawing cunches of redberry and manzanita bushes that hid the bark huts of the Concows. The valley lay quiet under the searching gaze of Digger John and Scalper Loomis. A morning breeze brought a reek of human waste, of decaying vegetation, to the pinched nostrils of Loomis.

Avidly, the Scalper peered into the shadows not yet drawn apart by the rising sun then punched Digger with an elbow. "They in there?"

"Can't you smell them?"

"That them?"

"Shore, Scalper; let's get on, afore they come awake."

"Mighty powerful smell," cautioned Loomis, "for a couple dozen Injuns."

"You never smelt a rabbit pen?"

"Then lead the way, John-nee!" snapped Loomis.

Digger John stepped to the granite rim and peered down. He felt Loomis move to his side. Quickly, he lifted the pint of brandy from his hip pocket and

rolled it up in the belly of his shirt. Then without turning his head, Digger gripped Loomis's boney wrists and leaped out.

Loomis coughed explosively and screamed, jerking free.

Digger flailed his legs, worked his way into a sitting position holding his arms over his face; he passed the shadows of the squatting tamarac and loosened his frame to hit.

Rump first he lighted on a mound of seeping sand that centuries had deteriorated from the granite. He felt his neck creak, and his injured head swelled a red haze across his good eye. Digger checked his unbroken bottle. He waited; then Loomis's flailing body lighted in a redberry bush. The bounty hunter was kicking and hissing like a cat caught in flypaper.

"Git me outa here!" Loomis raved.

"Sit still, Scalper. That scream'll bring them . . ."

"You damned fool!" began Loomis furiously, but his words suddenly ended as his eyes popped wide open.

Indians, flat feet slapping the granite, loomed out of the brush. Scrubby-headed, wide mouth with teeth exposed in delight; the black-bodied Indians carried needle sharp spears in long dirty hands. They were chuckling as if they had discovered two fat pigs bogged in a swamp.

Scalper Loomis was hoisted out of the manzanita, his arms bound at the elbows and marched away. Digger John's captors were more cautious, they probed suspiciously with their spears. They mumbled and argued, apparently concerned about the evil ramifications of Digger's yards of bandages. Finally, Digger rose and strolled nonchalantly down the path, leaving his clucking escorts to follow.

Chief Liver Hoss waited in the main clearing. Dressed in a brown Nankeen coat, no shirt, a breechclout, a pair of calvary leggings strapped under his bare feet. His angular face was streaked with cinnabar scars and from his lobed ears dangled a pair of silver dollars. A crop of horse's hair plumed and dyed red, shook as he stomped in the dusty compound.

"You come—" Liver Hoss grunted, "we fix . . ." His eyes avoided looking into Digger's good eye but turned and glared balefully at the bound figure of Scalper Loomis. The bounty killer raised a corner of his mouth to whine a protest, but Liver Hoss cut him off with a rambling jabber of Concow.

A hundred savages leaped about, then formed a double line facing each other. Each had a weapon; hoe handles, tomahawks, clubs of knotted oak and long handled lashes, their leather knotted around egg sized stones. Several butcherknives glinted.

"What's this?" Scalper grunted.

"Guantlet—we run it," Digger explained. "Them clubs an' knives is for hittin' an' stabbin' at us."

"You said they was only a couple dozen," Loomis mouthed fiercely. "Hell, they's thousands!"

"These," blandly answered Digger, "is the wrong bunch; ours is over the other side of the valley. Once we get through here, we'll go over there an' get our scalps. They're ready . . . Get to runnin', Scalper. You got to make it on your own feet, understand? If they beat you down, they burn you at the stake; if you stay upright, they turn you loose."

LOOMIS was prodded forward, his bounds cut by Chief Liver Hoss and a mad cheer rose along the guantlet as the lean figure leaped out. Clubs flailed; whips lashed, and knives flashed as the bounty killer twisted and fought past the first fifty Concows.

Digger watched, and was pleased. The Arizonian was standing up to it. He was lashing out at his tormentors, he had finally wrestled a club from an Indian and, whirling like a Dervish, was bashing back. But a blow broke across Loomis's eyes; blinded, he was trapped

and gleefully pounded into the dirt of the compound.

Liver Hoss screamed orders. Loomis's frame was hauled out and the savages turned their bloodthirsty eyes to Digger John.

The miner made a few lightening passes with his arms, then advanced a closed fist. Slowly he reached into the fist and extracted the end of a roll of gauze. Staring intently, he pulled a few yards of the gauze free and handed the end to the bugeyed Chief. Then Digger walked up to the first club holding Indian. For his particular pleasure, Digger yanked several feet of gauze and passed on, leaving the Indian holding a filmy loop. Apeing the incantations of a magician, Digger John passed the first half of the guantlet and the gauze-draped club-holders, holding their loop of gauze as if it was quicksilver.

Then Digger John opened his fist, exposing his bare palm. An awed mutter rose behind him but dark frowns raised on the brows of the cheated Concows as they raised their furious weapons. Chief Liver Hoss screamed orders, but Digger halted; making more lightning-like passes, he extracted his whiskey bottle. Pulling the cork, he grabbed the closest Concow and cupped a dram into the dirty hands. Skeptical faces watched closely as Digger struck a match and waving the flame, laid the match carefully on the brandy. The Concow leaned forward and the blue flame danced upward, searing his nostrils.

The scorched Concow yelped and slapping his burning hands crow-hopped out of line. Digger smiled cheerfully and holding the bottle walked forward, offering to repeat the trick to each Indian. They drew back in headshaking concern and Digger John completed the guantlet. With a "thank you" nod to Chief Liver Hoss, Digger stalked over to Scalper Loomis and bent to raise the battered man.

"You're yellow—a whinning yellow dog, Scalper!" Digger muttered fiercely. Loomis lashed out blindly, his boney fist landing flush against Digger's nose.

The chief, realizing he had been outwitted and that Digger had passed through the guantlet—and was free by Concow law—shouted orders.

Digger John was hauled away from Scalper Loomis. The bounty hunter was dragged to the center of the compound and bound to a charred stake. Squaws leaped forward and stripped Loomis of his trousers, then drew back to scurry for manzanita branches which they excitedly stacked to the waist of their victim.

DIGGER JOHN ranted and raved; he fought against the crew who were trying to hold him off from attacking Loomis. The Concows hooted at one white man trying to kill another; they wrestled with the miner until Digger broke through and aimed a wicked blow at the bound and half-conscious figure of Scalper Loomis.

Dragged off, Digger John strode to Chief Liver Hoss and folding his arms across his chest, shouted. "Let *me* have that rat!"

"We burn him," objected Liver Hoss.

"You burn him?" sneered Digger. "The outside, you burn only; a strong man can stand much burning."

Liver Hoss's black eyes gleamed. He coughed in appreciation, his breath as fetid as death. "How *you* burn him—in belly?"

Digger reached and drew Liver Hoss's hands into a cup, then began his magician's gestures. Liver Hoss snatched his hands away. The chief smirked then nodded his assent. Flinging his paint streaked arms wide, Liver Hoss harangued his tribe.

They watched Digger with glee as he stalked to the bound man at the burning stake. His shadow, a broad ally, shrank away behind him.

Raising Loomis's head, Digger John looked past the nicotine colored skin and deep into the squinty, sun faded eyes. Loomis tried to glare but deep inside the orbs, Digger could detect fear. Digger smiled.

"You can stop worryin', Scalpeer," Digger whispered. "I'll get you out—if you're scared of dyin'?"

"I'm scared," admitted the bitter Loomis. "You done all this a-purpose cause I pistol whipped you, didn't you?"

Nodding, Digger gave instructions. "I'm goin' to light up a bowl of brandy —you drink it. Might burn your lips but you drink it slow. Act up—like it was torture. You make like dyin' then —when I holler—you run, duck, dodge an' scoot—back the way we come. I'll meet you at Gold Run. Understand, Scal-peer?"

Numbly, Loomis nodded, asking. "How'll you get out?"

"That gauze is goin' to explode," answered Digger.

Turning, he shouted for a metal bowl; it was brought by a skittish squaw. Digger John emptied the brandy bottle, then shoved it into Loomis's loosened hands.

Loomis cringed; he squirmed; his head drew back. Digger swore and ranted at the victim, finally ordering the man's arms retied and his head fastened to the post.

The Indians stood back and watched Digger light the liquor. They muttered in appreciation as the bound man was forced to gulp the fire, his face blued against the flame that worked around his lips. Digger drew back and flumg the empty bowl aside. Loomis slumped in feigned death and Digger snatched a knife from an astonished savage and cut through the bounds. Loomis let his body sprawl in the dust.

Digger John, striking matches, cupping his lips over the burning heads as he chewed the sticks with relish, moved majestically to Chief Liver Hoss. The chief, expectant of more magic by this huge bandaged man, watched Digger gather the strip of gauze and loop it through the crowd of bugeyed warriors.

Then, striking another match, he pushed it in between his lips and emitted the still burning match. Chief Liver Hoss applauded until Digger touched the gauze with the lighted match.

Like a snake of fire, the gauze exploded, racing through the assembly. Digger yelled. Loomis came alive and ran for the brush. Digger John smashed a fist into Liver Hoss's face; the chief fell, Digger took off in the opposite direction.

"What'd you think of our Concow Injuns, Loomis?" Dredger Dan set a polished glass before the seared face of the Arizona bounty killer.

"Mean," answered the subdued Loomis, turning to spit and noting the glare from the saloonkeeper, suddenly refrained.

"What'd you think of California?" pressed Dredger Dan.

"Big and mean," answered Loomis.

"Dig," the saloon man turned to the grinning miner, "how'd you make that gauze explode?"

"Fulmite of mercury, Dan. Primin' for percussion cap weapons—'cept where they use a drop, I soaked that gauze in the bottle."

"Loomis," Dan whirled back to the bounty killer. "What'd you think of California Mountain men?"

"Devils," muttered the scalper, raising a glass carefully to his burned mouth. He looked at Digger. "Can I leave now, Mister John?"

Digger nodded and the man in the saloon watched the bounty hunter exit. The batwings whispered then the hoofs of his roan clattered quietly up the graveled street.

★

You'll find that it's like the old times, once you set off the main roads.

THE WEST IS STILL THE WEST

by Archie Joscelyn

NOSTALGIA is a four-dollar word, and a badly misused one. Ignorance is just a two-bit word, but that one is overworked, too. Consider it a moment. Despite airplanes, modern highways and motor cars and tourist travel, some downcast folks are plumb scared of the very word "West". They are still convinced that Indians keep on the warpath, and that the inhabitants, like the land, are highly uncivilized.

Other folks go just as far the other way, and declare that the old west is as dead as Custer, and that nothing remains but the synthetic. In between those two classes of misguided folk are those who sigh nostalgically—there, we got it in!—for the good old days which cain't nohow be duplicated nor found again. And all three of those groups are partly right and mostly wrong.

When I was a boy, big cattle drives used to go past our place on the way to market; the stagecoaches still competed with the iron horse. It was not uncommon for neighbors to settle differences with sixguns or Winchesters—preferably the latter, for they had a longer range. There was barbed wire, but there were wide-open spaces in plenty.

There has been change in the last half-century. Jet planes didn't swoosh over in the old days; autos couldn't boast of three hundred horse power; there was no walkie-talkie. No movies, either. Just the same, over the years I've observed a lot of change—and as one oldtimer put it, the more things change, the more they are the same.

Don't be fooled by what you don't see when whizzing along at seventy miles per hour on a paved highway. Plenty of folks who come looking for the real west never even glimpse it, but that is their fault. If you really want to find the timeless west,

it's right here and waiting. Only, it was a wild, rough, pioneering land—and that part of it still is! Those who want to find the real thing need to do a bit of roughing it, and I'm not talking about the dude ranches. Dude ranches are fine, and will give you a good look at first class scenery and a fair imitation of the old—which is what they are supposed to do. But they do it at a good price, and with all the modern comforts taken care of.

Let's consider the validity of some complaints. The one, for instance, which claims that everything is synthetic today—there are no tough he-men left, no real dogies, no wild cayuses. That gripe reminds me of the old girl who spent an afternoon viewing a movie of ancient Rome, then sighed wistfully over the strong men pictured. "If only we had lived in an age when such men walked the earth!" she sighed to her companion.

Mebby so; but who portrays them so convincingly now? And when you watch a cowboy risk life and limb at a rodeo, and do as fancy riding as any of his ancestors ever managed, where did he learn it? Not in a drawing-room. Watch a cutting horse put on an exhibition, going into a bunch of steers and single-mindedly cutting out the particular animal indicated by his rider. He learned that on the range, just as other cayuses learned it in the eighties. This goes all the way down the line.

It's true there's a difference in cattle since the longhorns were hazed up from Texas. We might as well be frank and admit the truth, for it's evident in movies. Directors of pictures would use longhorns if they could get them, but longhorns just aren't around any more. Folks like more steak and roasts and less bone and gristle—and that goes for horn. A new and tastier breed of animal has been produced over the years.

But the lack of longhorns doesn't greatly change the nature of a cow-critter; the basic instincts are all there. They'll scrap just as viciously among themselves, turn wild in a period of months on a back range, stampede, or go primitive at a rodeo. Same with horses, same with men. You'll see fancy pants on riders at the rodeo, and in movies; but get back on the big ranches where the real work is done, and mostly the garb is about the same as ever.

HOW DO I find such places? is the complaint. Why, dog-gone it, just go back where the big ranches *are*. As we mentioned, you don't see them, whizzing along at seventy miles an hour; fact is, you don't see much of anything at that speed.

But dig out those road maps and study them a while. Take most any western state, especially the old beef states—Nebraska, for instance, which calls itself The Beef State. Follow down from the Dakota line, by way of Valentine, on Federal Highway 83. When you hit state highway number 2, swing south and east toward Broken Bow.

You'll see the North Fork of the Loup River, and travel a long way through the valley of the Middle Loup. You'll see a lot of unfenced, untamed country—mighty pretty country, rolling hills, cattle country. You won't see many houses or people; and towns and filling stations are mighty scarce.

Of course you won't actually see much, not from the highway; but try striking back from the highway—suit yourself where. In a mile, you'll be out of sight of the road, lost to view from civilization. In other words, you'll be in the West just as it was and has been and is for a century.

Look far enough, and you'll find the cattle ranches—not the land, but the home outfits. You won't find dude outfits, but the real thing. They are a long way apart, and the roads aren't paved—but you were looking for the *oldtime* country, weren't you? There it is.

You can find it in Montana, or Dakota, Oregon, Wyoming—plenty of places, back off the main roads. You may find electricity in the houses; running hot and cold water; three-hundred-horse power motor cars and a plane handy—but the basic country and customs are the same. And not everybody is prosperous. You can find where the little fellow hauls his drinking water a few miles, and washes scantily in a basin at the side of the kitchen. Along with that, you'll discover plenty of the primitive, just as it used to be.

Many a time you can find such places half a dozen miles from a good-sized city. Just get on the dirt roads that crawl back in the hills, where the country is pretty and the going is tough on low-slung motor cars.

Ghost towns? There are plenty of them still around, but it's the same story—the real article are only to be found off the

good roads, and you'll need to do some pioneering and sweating to get to them.

Of course, if it's wide-open towns you want, there are a lot of those to be found——pretty much unchanged from nigh a century ago. They come with the construction of the big dams, the oil booms, and so on. Outwardly they are modern, as to motor cars and such-like. But the he-men who work on those jobs, who spend their money in drinking and gambling and all the rest, aren't much changed from the old days.

Off the highways, you can see sagebrush for miles, or greasewood, or any sort of scenery—just as it was a century ago. You can get lost, so far as towns or barbed wire are concerned—or really lost if you're a tenderfoot, away from the highway markers.

It's buffalo you want to see? Heck, go take a look. There are a lot of big parks, such as Wind Cave in South Dakota; Yellowstone; or one above St. Ignatius, the old mission town, in Western Montana, where big herds roam in approximately the wild state. But if evidences of civilization—such as tall fences around the place—irk you, you can still be accomodated. Not more than an hour's drive from where I live, on a ranch back from Stevensville, in Montana, buffalo run with the horses and cattle. Real buffalo, on an ordinary ranch, with only ordinary fences.

Thousands of tourists pass within a few miles of that spot each year and never suspect what is just back in the hills, on the old winding dirt roads, just off the pavement. In fact, the majority of tourists and sightseers miss most of what they are supposedly looking for, wherever they go. They go too fast, and they stick to the paved roads.

But five miles back off most any of them, anywhere in the *West*, you can find the *West* pretty much as it was a century ago. Poke around, taking your time. Don't ask the information agencies, but engage in conversation with those who *live* there—and you'll unearth real treasure.

Oh yes, a word of caution. Don't go barging too wild and roughly when you get back where the species tourist is a rarity. Be polite, same as they in the old days, so's not to be mistaken for a trespasser or something worse. Otherwise you may find the *real* Old West, and have somebody take a shot at you.

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This valley looked like paradise to Matt Lyons — until he walked into a couple of cabins to find a murdered man in each one!

PEACEFUL AS BOOTHILL

by J. J. MATHEWS

A LONE HORSEMAN, a black-clad man astride a big black horse, clattered to a halt atop a distant ridge, a motionless, statue-like pair framed against the vacant eastern sky.

There was a saucer-shaped valley immediately below Matt Lyons. There were trees beyond it, directly westward, beyond the upper rim of the valley—tall, willowy, graceful cottonwoods that towered so high overhead that the sky seemed to be resting upon them. There were hills to the north and snow-capped mountains beyond them, so far distant that they were now little more than etched outlines silhouetted against the background of blue sky.

Southward, as far as he could see, was a hump-backed greenish carpet of thick, lush grass. But it was the valley itself that caught and held Lyons' eye... It was Paradise, a garden-spot set apart from the rest of the world.

Lyons rode down the trail...actually it was little more than a trampled grassy path. There was a stream at the foot of the incline; and on the opposite bank of the stream, nestling beneath the wide-spreading branches of a shade tree, was a cabin. There was no one about the place. The black halted in the middle of the stream and drank his fill, then, at Lyons' bidding he went on again and finally scrambled up on the opposite bank. They halted again pres-

ently in front of the cabin. The door was closed.

"Hi, there!" Lyons called.

There was no reply. The door slipped its latch, creaked and opened a bit. Lyons dismounted and waited expectantly. He took off his hat and fanned himself with it, surprised that no one appeared in the doorway.

"Hi," he called again. "Anybody home?"

Still there was no answer. He sauntered up to the door, pushed it open and peered in. There was a table in the very center of the cabin; at the table sat a man, his elbows on the table, his head in his hands.

"Howdy," Matt Lyons said.

His eyes widened. Through the rungs of the chair he saw something that startled him...a widening stain on the floor. He strode over the threshold and circled the table, halted on the far side of it and looked down. Blood was trickling down the man's right arm from a wound directly behind his right temple. Lyons whirled around the table, bent over the man, pushed his arm gently. The arm fell lifelessly to the table and slid off...the man sagged limply and toppled out of his chair to the floor.

Lyons was at the man's side in a single stride. He bent over him quickly. After a minute he shook his head and climbed heavily to his feet. There was a frown on his face.

"Dead all right," he muttered, then as an afterthought he added, "Doggone the luck...first human I come across after three days o' ridin' and he's dead's he'll ever be."

There was a window in the far wall, directly in line with the table and the door. Lyons sauntered over and looked out. His eyes ranged over the valley, halted on something far westward, half way up the rim of the saucer, something he had evidently failed to notice there earlier...another cabin. He looked back over his shoulder at the motionless figure on the floor; there was nothing he could do for the man. He'd hustle over to the other cabin and report what he had found. He turned on his heel and went out, strode directly to the waiting black, and vaulted up into the saddle, wheeled the big horse, spurred him and sent him racing away. The black's lightning hoofs flashed over the grassy terrain.

IT WAS PROBABLY ten minutes later when they came thundering up to the second cabin. The black slid to a stiff-legged halt. Lyons leaped to the ground and marched briskly to the door. It was closed. He rapped on it loudly, impatiently. There was no answer. The frown on his face deepened. He turned the knob slowly. The door opened. He pushed it back and stared hard. Face downward on the floor lay a man, his right arm outflung, his left arm folded beneath him. Just beyond him was an overturned chair.

"I'll be doggoned!" Matt Lyons sputtered. He plunged into the cabin, dropped to one knee beside the sprawled figure on the floor and turned him over on his back. "Uh-huh...dead, and like the other feller he ain't even cold yet. What'n hell's going on 'round here, anyway?"

He came erect again, slowly and thoughtfully, and a bit disturbed. It was not the sight of a dead man that disturbed him, for death was not particularly startling to him; he had seen many men die, some of them at his very feet, some of them too before the smoking muzzles of his own guns. The brace of twin black Colts that hung low against his lean, muscular thighs were the tools of a master craftsman; their smooth, worn butts were an unspoken and undeniable indication of frequent and lightning use.

But these were not ordinary deaths...

"Somebody around here is up to 'is neck in killin's," he muttered to himself.

He turned and trudged out, halted for a moment outside the open door and

looked back over his shoulder at the dead man. Lengthening shadows had already draped themselves over him. Lyons turned his head away. It was dark now; he seemed surprised to find that evening had taken such complete possession so quickly. A light breeze had sprung up. It danced gaily through the grass. Now there was a pronounced brightening overhead; the broad, smiling, time-wise face of a silvery moon appeared in the sky.

"Looks are shore deceivin'," Lyons mumbled. "If ever I saw a peaceful-enough lookin' place, complete with all the trimmin's, too, this is it awright... only what do I find here? Hell, only a couple o' dead men...and both o' them murdered! Yeah, this is a peaceful valley awright...oh yeah!"

He climbed up into the saddle. He would have to find a suitable camp site for the night. He wheeled the big horse, nudged him with his knees. The black loped away...

MATT LYONS awoke with a protesting cry of, "Hey...ouch!" when a heavy boot thudded cruelly against his ribs. Instinctively he tried to pull away before he received a second kick, halted abruptly when he bumped his head against the knee of a man who was standing on the other side of him. He opened his startled eyes, blinked in the early morning light and looked up. There were men all around him, grim-faced, tight-lipped, cold-eyed men with ready, levelled guns in their hands.

"Get up outta there!" an authoritative voice said gruffly.

"All right."

The blankets were jerked away from him. Lyons climbed stiffly to his feet. Someone came up behind him and jammed the uncompromising muzzle of a gun against his spine; someone else pulled his guns out of their holsters.

"Somebody mind tellin' me what this is all about?" Lyons asked.

One of the men in front of him, a burly man with thick wrists and an equally thick red neck which rose up out of the soiled, torn collar of a dirt-streaked shirt, glared at him.

"You wouldn't be knowin', would yuh?" he rasped. "Wa-al, mebbe when you feel a rope tightenin' aroun' yore neck yore mem'ry 'll come back to yuh. C'mon, you fellers...bring th' skunk along. We ain't got all day, y'know."

A man reached for Lyons' arm but the black-clad man pulled away hastily. "Wait a minute," he said quickly. "This got somethin' t' do with those two dead men I found layin' in their cabins last night?"

A man laughed scornfully, a dark, thin-faced, lanky man with a drooping mustache. "How d'yuh like that, Pete?" he asked, turning to the bulky man. "First off he wants t' know what this is all about. Next breath he's givin' 'imself dead away! 'Course this has somethin' t' do with them two killin's, yuh murderin' polecat! How much it has t' do with 'em yuh'll soon find out, b'lieve me!"

The man named Pete laughed loudly. "An' how he will, Rocky!"

"Anybody see me kill them two fellers?" Lyons asked. "Anybody know of a good reason why I'd want t' kill 'em?"

Rocky's lips thinned. "Yuh're th' on'y stranger around these parts, Mister," he said coldly, "so yuh're it... see? B'sides yuh look like th' killer kind t' me."

"That's swell. Those are both fine reasons for pinnin' a couple o' killin's on me," Lyons retorted. "How do I know this ain't a frameup, that you didn't kill them y'self?"

Rocky's eyes blazed. He took a step forward, his gun upraised. "Why, yuh murderin' coyote, I'll...."

"Yeah, you with a gun in your hand and me without 'ny," Lyons said calmly.

ROCKY'S jaw muscles twitched but he managed to control himself. He

whirled around. "C'mon, Pete," he said thickly. "Let's get this bus'ness over with b'fore somethin' happens. If yuh don't, I'm li'ble t' lose m' temper an' start blastin' away at this feller."

"Where's that danged rope?" Pete demanded. "Who'd I give it to?"

"Hold on a minute," another man said. He edged his way forward. He was an older man with greying hair at his temples. "Keep yore shirt on, Rocky. That goes f'r all uv yuh, you too, Pete, y'hear? I'm still Boss an' I reckon it's about time I kinda took over. Now then, Mister...what d'yuh know about these killin's?"

"Danged little," Lyons replied. "All I can tell you is that I found the first feller...."

"That was Steve Jackson," the older man interrupted.

"Sittin' at his table," Lyons continued. "When he didn't answer my greetin' I stepped inside the cabin and touched his arm. He fell out of 'is chair. He was dead."

The man's face gave no indication of his belief or disbelief of Lyons' recital. His eyes probed Lyons' face unceasingly. "Awright," he g r u n t e d. "What about Sam?"

"Who? Oh...would that be the other feller?"

"Yep... Steve an' he were brothers."

"I see. I don't know 'ny more about him than I do about the other one," Lyons said. "When I spied this Sam's cabin I hustled over to it figurin' that oughta let somebody else know what I'd discovered. Sam was sprawled out on the floor, on 'is face, dead's he'll ever be. That's all I can tell you."

Rocky laughed coldly, scornfully. "Boss, this feller's just about the' damnedest liar I ever ran across."

"Mebbe," the grey-haired man answered. "But I'm willin' t' bet yuh're a bigger fool 'n he is."

Rocky flushed beneath his employer's barbed reply. He turned away awkwardly.

"Mister, I'm Dan Jones," the grey-haired man said, facing Lyons again. "I own the' Circle Dot an' this hull danged valley. Ask anybody 'bout me an' they'll tell yuh that I'm a fair an' patient man. If I wasn't, yuh wouldn't be standin' there now...yuh'd be swingin' fr'm the' nearest tree."

The rancher cleared his throat. "I've let yuh tell yore side o' th' story but I ain't fool enough t' b'lieve yuh or disb'lieve yuh yet, leastways not 'till I've had a chance t' check up on a couple o' things c'nnected with th' killin's. But when I've done that I find that yuh're th' liar that Rocky claims yuh are, yuh'll swing f'r yore crimes. But on th' other hand, if there are 'ny doubts in my mind 'bout yore havin' done th' killin's, yuh'll go free. That clear?"

Lyones nodded understandingly.

"There's just this much advice I wanna give yuh," the rancher went on. "Watch yore step, do's yuh're told, don't ty 'ny tricks an' 'bove all, don't try t' get away. Life c'n be awf'lly short...savvy?"

Lyons listened attentively, but he made no reply. It was evident that Jones expected none for he turned away the moment he finished speaking.

"Get 'is horse, one uv yuh," Jones commanded, turning toward the others who had been standing quietly behind the burly Pete and Rocky who appeared to have lost much of his earlier interest in the "prisoner." "We got things t' do f'r th' Jacksons, so let's get started b'fore that danged sun gets too hot."

IT WAS some two hours later when the troop of horsemen, with Dan Jones, grimly silent, tight-lipped and busy with his own thoughts, riding at its head, and Matt Lyons equally grim-faced and silent in the very middle of it, surrounded by men who watched

him constantly and who made no attempt to conceal their suspicions of him, came within sight of the Circle Dot. The punchers did not ease their watchfulness. As before they kept close enough to him to discourage any plan he might make to break away. At the same time they managed expertly to keep a comfortable and safe distance from him, thus implying that it would be foolhardy to attempt to plan on snatching a gun out of the nearest rider's holster. Earlier, Jones himself had relieved Lyons of his rifle.

They cantered through an open gateway and pulled up in front of the Circle Dot ranchhouse. There was a bunkhouse, a long, low, flat building, directly opposite the ranchhouse, and an empty corral a hundred feet beyond it. The ranchhouse itself was a two-story high structure, solidly built, spacious and evidently kept well in repair. It had been painted recently and it gleamed with a startling brightness in the morning sunlight. A handful of men who had been lounging in the doorway of the bunkhouse came out to meet them.

Jones dismounted and nodded to Lyons. The latter eased himself out of the saddle as did the other horsemen. At a nod from the rancher two of the riders came forward.

"Take 'im upstairs, boys," Jones directed.

One of the men went on ahead. He trudged up the porch steps, opened the door and held it wide. "Come on," he called.

His companion nudged Lyons, fell in behind him and followed him up the steps and into the house. There was a narrow stairway just beyond the door. "Upstairs," the first man droned.

Lyons obeyed, started up the stairway when a woman suddenly appeared on the landing above. She came down slowly, hesitated, and finally stopped altogether. Lyons halted, too, as did the two men behind him. There was an awkward pause with both the woman and Lyons waiting for the other to go on. She was a comely woman, Lyons noted. Her eyes faltered beneath his gaze.

"Martha!"

It was Dan Jones' voice. Lyons turned his head and looked down. Jones, a frown on his face, was standing at the foot of the stairs, looking up at the woman. She flushed and fled down the stairs. As she came abreast of him Lyons saw that she was considerably older than his first glance had revealed.

"Go 'head," the man directly behind Lyons said.

They plodded on, turned on the landing toward an open door. Presently they halted in front of it. "Awright, Mister," one of the men said. "In yuh go."

Lyons stepped into the room. The door closed quickly behind him. He heard a key grate in the lock. He shrugged his shoulder and looked about the room. It was a small room; there was a single bed in the middle of it and a bureau stood just beyond the bed. There was a curtained window in the far wall and a small chair close by. Lyons strode over and drew back the curtain. There was an iron grating over the window. He snorted disgustedly, dropped the curtain and turned away.

He went back to the bed. "H'm," he muttered. "Looks like the real thing."

He seated himself on the edge of the bed, thumped the mattress with a sledge-hammer fist. "Uh-huh...feels like it, all right."

He took off his hat and scaled it across the room. It struck the wall, a foot or two beyond the window, and fell to the floor. He pulled off his boots and dropped back on the pillow, swung his legs up on the bed and stretched out full length.

"A-a-ah," he said with a long, drawn-out sigh. "This is the life for me."

He closed his eyes.

THE DAY wore away slowly. There were times when Lyons, completely "slept out," and restless now for the want of something active to do, was more than willing to wager that it would never end and that night would never come. But it did, finally, and with nightfall came a tray of hot food, the first he had had all that day.

Two men brought it to his door. One of them, his hand curled around the butt of his gun, watched carefully and alertly while his companion, purposely unarmed so that Lyons could gain nothing by overpowering him, handed in the tray. There was no conversation; there was no need for any, then the door was jerked shut and, as before it was locked from the outside. Half an hour later the two men returned and removed the emptied tray. When they had gone, Lyons sauntered over to the window, pushed the curtain aside and peered out. He reached for the chair, swung it around and brought it closer to the window and sat down. He could see but little... the iron grating over the window limited and hampered his vision...he gave up finally, got to his feet and went back to the bed.

He lay there for a time, flat on his back, staring moodily up at the ceiling. He heard a step in the hallway, heard someone stride past his door; presently he heard another door, fairly close by, open and shut. He heard voices, too, but they were indistinct; he sat upright when they were suddenly louder and clearer...and closer. He was up out of the bed instantly. Quickly his eyes ranged over the room. He looked hard, twice...he hadn't noticed before that there was a door behind the bureau. He strode over to it, moved the bureau away and listened intently at the key hole.

"You're a fool, Dan Jones," he heard a woman say sharply. "What's more... you're a coward!"

Lyons' eyebrows arched. He wondered if it was the woman he had "met" on the stairway. Jones, he recalled, had called her Martha.

"Doggone it, Martha," he heard Jones answer protestingly. "Yuh don't hafta holler so, do yuh? Th' hull world don't hafta know all about this. It's more'n enough that we know."

"Then why didn't you let the boys go through with it?" she demanded wrathfully. "If the boys had hung him, that would have been the end of it... no one would have thought any more about it. The Jacksons had been killed and we-ll, the boys had trapped the man responsible for the crime and they'd taken the law into their own hands and hung him. Why, you wouldn't have had a thing to worry about! But, oh, no...you had to interfere! You had to spoil the most perfect and most natural setup possible!"

"Martha," Jones said wearily. "Like I told yuh b'fore, I had to. I couldn't stand by an' let 'em hang 'n innocent man."

"You'd rather have them hang you, I suppose!" she gritted scornfully.

There was no reply from the rancher.

"LISTEN to me, Dan," Martha went on presently. "You're in too deep to quit now. You're a murderer...you might just as well go the whole hog. We planned those killings so we could get the Jacksons' money and save our ranch. All right then... finish the job. You know where the money's buried...go and get it. It's the only way we can take care of those notes. No one will ever know that it isn't our money; what's more, and what's so good about this...no one but you ever knew about the Jacksons' cache!"

"What about that feller in th' next room?"

"Have the men turned in yet?"

"Yeah...'couple o' minutes ago. Why?"

"You slip out the back way," Martha directed. "Don't be seen or heard."

"Awright...if you say so. But what about that other feller?"

"Oh, he's going to escape," Martha said calmly. "I'm going to help him get away. When you get back we'll rouse the men, pretend we've been asleep and tell them that he's managed to get away. The men will follow and when they catch him again, which shouldn't be very difficult for them, they can finish their job. There'll be no interference this time because they won't have you with them. You won't be feeling well enough to accompany them...see?"

"I dunno, Martha," Jones said heavily.

"I do!" she snapped. "Now get out of here and mind you, be quiet about it. And Dan...."

"Yeah?"

"Don't fgorget what you're going for."

There was no reply. Lyons heard the door close. Jones had gone. He shoved the bureau back in place and quickly went back to the bed. He lay there patiently, waiting...five minutes, ten minutes; the time dragged by slowly with each minute almost eternal, maddeningly long, until he finally lost track of time. Then he heard a step outside his door. He caught his breath. He heard a fumbling at the door, then a key grated in the lock. The door opened a bit. The woman Martha beckoned to him. He swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Quickly!" she whispered.

HE WAS at the door in an instant. "Yeah...what is it?" he asked in a low voice.

"Sh-h!" she cautioned him, her fingers pressed tightly against her lips.

He nodded understandingly.

"Your life's in danger," she whispered excitedly. "You must get away at once."

He grunted in reply.

"Come," she whispered and backed away from the door. He whirled around the bed to the window for his hat, scooped it up and clapped it on his head, strode swiftly across the room, over the threshold and halted in front of her outside the door. "Your horse is ready. He's outside the back door. Lead him away and when you're out of sight of the ranch, mount him and ride south. Understand?"

"Uh-huh...south," he repeated.

"Wait here."

She turned and went down the stairs. When she reached the lower floor she looked about her quickly, then up at him again and motioned to him. He nodded and tiptoed down the stairs. She turned again and led him to the back door. She opened it a bit, noiselessly. "Go quickly."

"All right."

He had already spied his gunbelt hanging from a nail behind the door.

"Thanks, Ma'm," he said, opened the door wider, reached up suddenly and snatched his gun belt off the nail, then, in a single stride he was out of the house and into the cool night air. He heard the door close behind him, looked back over his shoulder and saw that the lower floor of the house was dark. Martha evidently had turned out the light the moment he had gone. He stepped away from the door, backed against the side of the building, seeking the protection of the shadowy wall, whipped the heavy gun belt around his waist and buckled it on. He shifted the holsters so that they swung against his thighs with the jutting butts of the Colts directly below his finger tips.

He looked up then...there was a tree directly opposite him, some fifteen or twenty feet away; beneath the branches of the tree was the shadowy form of a horse. It was a big black and his heart leaped. With his own guns thumping against his thighs and his own horse within reach again he was ready for anything. He strode briskly toward the tree, quickened his pace in an effort to reach the black

before he recognized him and whinned. A moment or two later he was patting the sleek neck of the big horse, talking to him softly. Presently he caught up the dangling bridle, wheeled the black and led him away. There was thick grass all around him and Matt Lyons was grateful for it...it cushioned and absorbed the black's hoof treads.

Southward as directed they went, however, when the ranchhouse faded away into the night light, Lyons halted the black, vaulted into the saddle, wheeled the big horse, spurred him and sent him racing away eastward.

THE NIGHT sky was a bright, velvet-soft blue, moonlit and star-studded. The air was fresh and crisp, almost chilling, and a cool breeze swept downward through the silent valley from the distant hills and mountains; when it reached the stream at the very edge of the valley, it swerved sharply, banked and raced away toward the south.

Matt Lyons slowed the fleeting black to a muffled canter when a dark, shadow-draped building loomed up a hundred yards ahead of him. He recognized it at once...it was Sam Jackson's cabin. He jerked the black to a sudden halt when he thought he had seen a flickering pin-point of light move some where within the cabin. He watched it carefully for a moment; it vanished but reappeared again almost immediately, and he was satisfied that he hadn't imagined it.

"Uh-huh," he muttered grimly. "It's a light all right, and that means that Dan Jones is there. Like she told 'im to, he's shore goin' the whole hog, addin' robbin' to killin'."

He twisted around in the saddle, looked about him quickly, finally spied a thicket fairly close by, wheeled the black and guided him over to it, dismounted when they reached it and led him into it. He jerked out his guns, "broke" them, made certain that they were fully loaded and ready for instant use, holstered them again and strode off. He swerved a bit; he would come up behind the cabin, peer into it just to make certain that there was a prowler in the cabin and that the prowler was as he expected, Dan Jones. After he confirmed it he would plot his next move.

There was a fairly solid wall of thick brush all along the way...in the darkness he coudn't tell for certain if it extended as far as the cabin itself... and he swung behind it in order to avail himself of the protective cover it offered him against detection. Actually, there was but scant chance of his being detected...if the prowler was Jones, then he would be alone; however, if the prowler was someone other than Jones then there was a possibility that he might have a confederate perhaps posted outside the cabin to warn him if anyone approached. Despite the fact that he had no reason to suspect that the prowler would be anyone but Jones, he refused to take anything for granted and he kept safely behind the screening brush. Yet when he broke into the open...here and there he found gaps in the wall of brush...his black garb blended so perfectly with the night that he became part of it and to the casual observer, even to the alert watcher, he was nothing more than a flitting, silently-moving shadow, certainly not a man stalking another man.

Then he was almost upon the cabin. Unconsciously he slackened his pace for now there was no sign of the light and he began to doubt that he had seen one. It was only when he came up to the cabin and halted at the window at the rear that he knew that he hadn't imagined it. Something, perhaps a blanket, had been hung over the window, however, tiny rays of light managed to sift through the threadbare spots. He noticed too that the window was open, hardly more than an inch or two but it was more

than sufficient...he could hear the voice of a man inside the cabin and he was satisfied.

"F'r th' last time, Jones," Lyons heard a thick voice say, a voice that he promptly recognized as belonging to the burly puncher, the man named Pete. His lips thinned...he wouldn't forget Pete in a hurry. "We're gonna give yuh this last chance t' snap up our prop'sition. We know it was you who murdered th' Jacksons...what's more we know yuh done in on account o' their dough. Right? Wa-al, since we ain't lawm'n we don't give a damn about th' killin's; it's the' dough we're int'rested in. Split it three ways an' nob'dy'll ever know 'bout either th' killin's or th' dough. But if yuh don't, wa-al, Jones, yuh c'n figger th' answer out f'r y'self. Now what d'yuh say, huh?"

"Pete," Lyons heard Jones sputter. "Yuh're plumb loco. I didn't have nuthin' t' do with them killin's, b'lieve me. As f'r dough, I got more'n enough o' my own."

"S'ppose," another voice began and Lyons nodded to himself. It was Rocky speaking now. "S'ppose yuh tell us what yuh were doin' here, rummagin' through Sam's things, when we busted in on yuh?"

"I...I was huntin' f'r somethin'," Jones stammered in reply. "I was lookin' f'r a clue, that's right, f'r somethin' that'd lead me t' th' one that mighta had it in f'r th' Jacksons."

PETE LAUGHED loudly, derisively. "Boy, c'n he tell 'em, eh, Rocky?"

"An' how," the latter said briefly.

"Jones," Pete began again, "s'ppose I tell yuh that me an' Rocky got 'n earful o' what you an' the missus were talkin' about t'night, huh? S'ppose I tell yuh that we follered yuh upstairs t'night an' that we heard most everythin' you an' she said? C'mon...quit stallin' an' act smart, will yuh?"

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," Jones blurted out.

There was a momentary pause.

"Awright," Pete said finally, wearily. "Have it yore own way, Jones. C'mon, Rockey...we got places t' go an' things t' do."

"Right with yuh, Pete," Rocky answered. "It's a long ride fr'm here t' town so th' sooner we get started, th' sooner we'll get there. More'n likely we'll have a helluva time rousin' th' sheriff, too...he sleeps s' danged hard not even a band uv whoopin' C'manches c'n wake 'im, leastways, not ord'narily. Wa-al, Boss, so long. We'll be seein' yuh."

Lyons knew that it was just a bluff; the two punchers had no intention of betraying Jones. If they did, their chances of obtaining any of the Jackson money would be gone; if they could bluff the rancher, frighten him into believing that they were about to 'turn' him into the law, he might capitulate and accept their offer, reasoning that a third of a loaf would be better than none at all. Lyons heard them trudge across the cabin floor, heard the door open. He jerked out his guns, bolted around the house to the front, reached the half-opened door and kicked it wide open.

"Reach!"

Pete was nearest the door; Rocky

was perhaps two feet away from it while Jones, white-faced and nervous, stood behind a table that was midway between the window and the door. His eyes bulged.

"Reach, I said!"

A scowl darkened Pete's face. Rockey's mustache seemed to bristle. Slowly he raised his hands. It was the burly Pete who grunted and drew. A Colt flamed with a thunderous roar. Pete cried out, dropped his gun and clutched at his thick right wrist. Blood spurted from it and he stared at it, almost unbelievingly. Rocky's hands climbed upward at a much faster pace. Lyons kicked the door shut and backed against it.

"You, Jones...keep yore hand away from that gun. Rocky, face that wall," he commanded.

Rocky turned slowly. Lyons stepped forward, circling Pete yet watching him closely. He holstered one of his Colts, jerked Rocky's gun out of its holster and shoved it into his own belt, then he backed again toward the door. "All right, Rocky...turn around."

The latter turned slowly. As Matt Lyons neared Pete he lashed out suddenly with his right foot and kicked the puncher's gun into a far corner. Pete gave him a cold, murderous glare.

"Jones," Lyons began presently. "They say a man's never too old to make a fool of 'imself and you've shore proved that that's true. 'Course you were prob'bly in such a fix for ready money you didn't need much talkin' to t' get you to try anythin', even murder; still you'd think that when a feller gets t' be as old as you are you'd have more sense. Reckon some of us never get 'ny smarter no matter how long we live. Anyway, it was lucky for you that I came along when I did; if it was somebody else, d'pend on it, you'd be up for murder 'cause somebody else might not a' gone t' the trouble t' find out that you didn't kill the Jacksons but that these two polecats standin' here, did."

The rancher's mouth flew open. He tried to speak, gulped and swallowed hard, still nothing but a curious, gurgling sound came from him.

"'Course, Jones," Lyons went on, "the fact that Pete and Rocky actu'lly did what you set out to do and what you even thought you'd done, don't excuse you, not in the eyes o' the law, y'know. More'n likely you'll be punished...'course not like these two'll be. But whatever happens to you, I hope you'll learn fr'm it. If you're int'rested in knowin' what really happened, I can tell you."

He paused momentarily, glanced first at Pete who continued to glower at him, then at Rocky who quickly looked away.

"You plugged both o' the Jacksons," Lyons said, "only somehow you managed to wing both o' them in the same place, right 'longside o' the temple. The blood spouted out o' both o' th'm and that was all you had t' see. You were dead certain they were done for. But they weren't Jones. Yore two hired hands, Pete and Rocky here, musta been trailin' you and they musta found out pronto just what you were up to. They musta put two and two t'gether, figgered out why you wanted t' kill the Jacksons and d'cided t' finish what you started. 'Course they musta d'cided too that it'd be worthwhile t' them t' have you think you'd actu'lly done the killin'...they could hold that over your head like a club and make you keep payin' off through the nose 'till there wasn't anythin' left t' pay off with, then they'd have you at their mercy f'r fair. Wa-al, when I found the Jacksons I saw that the bullet wounds in their heads weren't the killin' kind. I looked 'em over and shore enough I found what did kill 'em. They'd been knifed. Reckon that's the story, Jones...all of it."

JONES HAD been staring at him all through his recital. Now he closed his eyes, wearied to the point of exhaustion; he swayed a bit but he

steadied himself again quickly, braced himself and faced Lyons unflinchingly.

"You're gonna have t' face the music, Jones," Lyons said. "Can you take what's comin' to you?"

The rancher nodded grimly.

"'Course," Lyons added quietly, "since we c'n pr'duce the actu'l killers, mebbe the law'll kinda look the other way where you're c'ncerned. Then too, since the sheriff's dead and a Ranger friend o' mine, feller named Smith Jenkins, is in charge o' things in this county, mebbe you'll get 'n even better break 'n you would ord'narily."

There was a new light in Dan Jones' tired eyes, a light of hope.

"Got a rope?" Lyons asked.

"Shore have. Want it?"

"Yeah. Think you c'n hog-tie them," Lyons asked, nodding toward Pete and Rocky, "so's we won't have t' worry 'bout 'em breakin' away?"

"An' how," Jones said grimly.

"Awright. Get yore own horse first, then see if you c'n round up theirs," Lyons directed. "Oh, yeah, Jones... what about the money the Jacksons were s'pposed t' have buried away?"

"It's under th' floor boards," the rancher answered. "There's a tin box heaped full...on'y it ain't money; it's nuggets an' most uv t ain't got 'ny more gold in 'em than you'd find in any rock pile. Shoulda knowed that 'cause both Sam an' Steve were plumb loco. Each thought th' other was madder'n all hell, that's why they hated each other an' lived apart. Reckon I'll go get that there rope o' mine now... awright?"

A FAINT glow of light burst into the vacant sky. It was dawn. Matt Lyons noticed it and nodded toward it.

"There y'are, Smith," he said. "It's another day."

The lean, bronzed man who wore a gold star on his shirt front, climbed stiffly to his feet, looked skyward and nodded. He stretched himself, yawned and grinned boyishly.

"Yep, another day is right," he answered presently, then he laughed. "Dogone it, Matt,...we've gabbed away a hull night 'stead o' doin' what other folks were doin'...sleepin'."

He turned and looked down the silent street. A dog appeared, barked, wheeled and disappeared into a nearby alley. The Ranger looked at Lyons, who was sitting on the single wooden step in front of the sheriff's office.

"It's funny, ain't it, Matt?" he mused.

Lyons looked up. "Huh? What is?"

"Oh, folks," the Ranger replied, "'specially women. Now take that Jones woman f'r 'n example. Th' way she came bustin' in here an' begged me t' lock 'er up, claimin' she was th' one who killed off them Jackson fellers, an' not her husband. What makes it so funny is that she was th' one who cooked up th' hull thing an' th' one who goaded 'im on 'till he actu'lly did make a try. But th' minute she figgered he was in trouble, she busts in an' trys t' shield 'im. She was th' cold-blooded one, th' connivin' one an' he was th' weaker one...on'y when she found out that he was free, she just about caved in an' clung to 'im f'r all she was worth. An' th' way he stood there, holdin' 'er in 'is arms, pattin' 'er cheek an' tellin' 'er t' be brave!"

"Yep, women are a curious lot, Smith. It's hard t' figger 'em out sometimes...mebbe I oughta say most times. Mebbe that air o' mystery about 'em, that way they have o' doin' th' unexpected is what gets men folks. Mebbe it's b'cause nob'dy ever really understands 'em that men fall f'r 'em, even marry 'em. You'll find that out some day, Smith...then you c'n tell me about it. S'ay, how's about some breakfast?"

Smith Jenkins grinned at him, turned and trudged into the office. Matt Lyons got to his feet, hitched up his gunbelt and followed him inside.

★

In years past, men had practised for days before calling out Eb Marshall. But now, only a miracle could see him through this bitter gun-feud.

Once, no one could beat Eb Marshall's lightning draw.

HE SAW THE LIGHT

by E. E. CLEMENT

OLD EB MARSHALL sat on the porch of Sol's General Merchandise Emporium and stared moodily across Mohawk's lone street. Under a slowly warming sun the town lay dormant. The few people about moved lazily, absorbing the sun's rays.

Eb moved his chair towards the rising sun and rubbed his gnarled hands. His face was as age-marked and creviced as the rocky hills ringing Mohawk. His eyes reflected the bleakness of those hills, a bleakness no sun, no warmth of living could dispell.

He kept at the rubbing of his hands. The old ache was in them again this morning, but his action was an unconscious one. The ache in his heart was the deep one, the one he couldn't help.

Sol came out, a fat man with a pleasant face, and said, "Morning, Eb; thought you'd gone back."

Eb grunted his response. He should have gone back to his spread, should

have been there the last two months. Farrell, his segundo, was a capable man, but he couldn't run the place the way Eb and Hardy had.

The bleakness in Eb's eyes was more pronounced at the thought of Hardy, and the ache inside grew deeper. He had made a serious mistake in his raising of Hardy and because of that mistake Hardy was gone. Eb had kept a promise to the boy's mother all these years; he could remember her last words now. "Please, Eb, don't teach our son to be a gunman."

There had been protest in Eb's heart, but he hadn't voiced it. He hadn't been a gunman, but a lawman with a swift, deadly hand and a hard, unremitting purpose towards those who had opposed him. He had been proud of his record, but that was in the past. He had kept his promise and he wondered if the knowledge was any satisfaction to her, wherever she was.

Sol rattled on, not noticing Eb's bitter reflection. "Noticed my new show window, Eb? This town is growing; I'm goin' after the women's trade."

Eb looked at the window without interest. For the past two weeks Sol had been busy extending a six-foot section of his show window almost to the edge of the porch. He had glassed in both sides and the front, and built display racks on all three sides.

"It'll make me money, Eb. Comin' up or down the street they can see the stuff. It'll be on their mind all the way to the store, and by the time they get here they won't be able to resist it."

MAYBE Sol was right; Eb Marshall wouldn't know. The west side of the window was a solid bank of hand mirrors. The front and east were filled with fancy soap, powder boxes and other geegaws dear to a woman's heart. All Eb knew was that the new addition had cut down porch space. If he wanted to stay in the sun during the day, he had to move his chair around the projection.

Sol went back in, and Eb resumed his bitter thoughts. Hardy had a way with cattle. Under his hands their ranch had grown from a two-bit spread into one of importance. His death had been a hard blow, but the manner of his going was even worse, and Eb could do nothing about it. His hands were as tied as though actual rawhide bound them.

He rubbed hard at his aching hands and cursed them.

"You wouldn't be sayin' those names at me, would you, Eb?" The rasping voice jerked Eb's head erect. The big man had come up as silent as a cat. He stood there, facing Eb, on slightly spread legs, his face a little expectant, the evil in his eyes hammering at Marshall. He was as shaggy and as unkempt as a rattler shedding the old skin, and he looked as dangerous.

Eb's eyes burned, but he kept his voice even. "I'm tellin' you, Luke—"

"You ain't tellin' me nothin'," Luke Nyson snapped. "I'm doing the tellin'. You're a mangy, yellow-bellied pup. You sent your kid to do the job you was afraid to tackle. I'm goin' to run you out of this valley—or shoot you out."

Eb's throat burned, and his cry was hoarse. He was half out of his chair when a warning hand clamped on his shoulder and shoved him down.

"Settle back, Eb." Anse Curdy must have been standing in the doorway, taking it all in. He walked past Marshall's chair to the edge of the porch, and stared a long moment at Luke. His lawman's badge, pinned to his vest, glittered in the sunlight. He seemed all calmness, all strength and Eb, watching him, felt like a hollow shell. If he could trade places with the Sheriff for just two minutes—two minutes would wipe out the hurt, the wrongs, the insults.

Anse said, "I'm declarin' myself in

on that runnin', Luke. If I catch you makin' any more trouble, I'm runnin' you out of town."

His gray eyes looked like winter skies, and Luke's eyes wavered a little before them. "Hardy tried to gun me," he said sullenly. "I just got him first. You better watch the old one. He'll shoot me in the back, just like he did my Dad down in Abilene."

His eyes flicked contemptuously over Eb, he laughed shortly and swaggered down the board walk.

"I didn't gun his Dad in the back," Eb said dully. "His Dad thought he was pretty fast. He came tryin' to run the Deputy out of town; I didn't run."

"I know, I know," Anse's voice soothed.

EB MARSHALL didn't hear him; he had to talk, had to get the hurt of those words out of his heart.

"Luke traveled a long ways to git even for his Dad. He musta waited a lotta years until he thought he was good enough." There was unconscious pride in Eb's words. Men didn't come after Marshall until they more than believed in themselves.

"Eb, broodin' about it ain't goin' to help any."

"A thousand times Luke tried to make me wear my guns again. You think I don't know what the town was sayin' about me? You think I didn't squirm under his lyin' words? And I couldn't do nothin' about it, Anse. Hardy stood it as long as he could, then he tried. You called it a fair fight, Anse; it wasn't."

"Hardy pulled first. I saw it, Eb."

"Sure, sure," Eb said wearily. "And he was as awkward and untrained as a new colt. He didn't know anything about gunslingin'; I couldn't teach him."

"I couldn't do anything about it, Eb, could I?"

"Nobody could do anything about it, only me. And I will, Anse. I'm goin' to kill Luke, if I have to lay for him some night."

"That would be murder, Eb. I'd hate to come after you." Anse's tone said he would, if Eb forced his hand. "Maybe your hands won't be crippled up forever. Maybe they'll—"

He looked at Marshall's hopeless face and stopped.

"They been this way for three years. When rheumatism hits an old man it don't go away. I'm askin' you again not to talk about it; I'm not askin' for favors from anyone."

Anse walked away swearing. That proud, old coyote. If the town knew about it, they'd run Luke out on a rail; Eb wouldn't have to lift a hand. Anse wouldn't have known if Hardy hadn't told him; he couldn't pass it along. He had promised Eb.

Eb sat on the porch until the late afternoon hours. The sun went down slowly and blocked the street's end with a huge ball of fire. Eb looked up a long string of cuss words. A puncher, ambling down the street, had stopped, jerked his head sharply, then swore. He passed Marshall, glaring.

Eb stared after him; the crazy galoot had acted as if he was drunk, but it didn't show in his walk.

A woman came from the west end of the street. Eb's eyes followed her disinterestedly. She went through the same actions as the puncher, leaving out the swear words. She ducked her head as she passed Eb, and he thought, *they act like I'm doin' something to them.*

He waited for the next passerby, his eyes a little sharper.

Three or four minutes passed before a cowboy came out of the *Spur and Bridle saloon* and walked towards Marshall. Eb heard his hoarse ejaculation as he stopped and jerked his head. He was frowning as he walked by.

EB MARSHALL got stiffly out of his chair. All three of those people

had done the same thing. Eb didn't know what caused it, but he was finding out. He walked to the end of the street, turned and retraced his steps toward Sol's Emporium. He paused every few steps and nothing happened. He felt a small sense of disappointment. It was funny that three crazy people would pass him in a row, but it sure looked that way.

He almost reached the end of Sol's porch when it hit him. He stopped and jerked his head; he was acting just like those other ones. He turned and tried it again, and the effect was the same. Eb's eyes glistened. He thought he had an answer, he'd know in a minute. He walked clear past Sol's store then turned and started his walk all over again. He got it again at the west end of Sol's porch. He pulled out a battered silver watch, looked at it, then tilted his head at the sky. His voice was strangely strangled. "Luke, I'm comin' after you."

He ate a good meal for the first time in two months, and the food tasted like something. He walked to his hotel room, reached into an old duffle bag and pulled out a brace of colts on a worn and shiny cartridge belt. He strapped it about him, his fingers trembling. The walnut butts of the guns were darkened and worn from much use, the guns were old but well cared for. Eb had never stopped cleaning and polishing them, even though he could no longer use them with his old skill.

He stood before the dingy mirror, his body bent a little, his nostrils pinched, the old sharp eagerness chasing the dull lines from his face. "Now," he breathed. His hands splayed talon-like, then dipped. The hard butts slapped into his palms, and the Colts came clear. Clear—but pitifully slow. He had done that a hundred times before in the last few months, and after each time weariness and defeat etched dull lines in his face. This time was the same, but now he was smiling.

"Luke," and his whisper was mightier than a roar. "I'm comin' after you."

He slept that night, untroubled. He awoke in the morning, and what he had to do today came back clear and sharp. He came out of bed like a young man, all fire and eagerness. He went to the window, and the sun was shining. It was all there before him, just the way he had seen it last night.

At noon he went looking for Luke, his guns left behind him. The day was here, but the time wasn't quite right.

He searched two saloons before he found Luke. He found him at the *Golden Vein,* and he heard Luke's words as he came through the batwings.

"The whole tribe was always yellow hounds. Traveled on a name, and when the name was gone—"

Two hangers-on guffawed at Luke's words. Anse, standing at the far end of the bar, made rings with his glass and frowned.

ONCE THOSE words would have pumped the hot blood into Eb's face. Now the pupils of his eyes contracted into pinpoints, and his words were a cold winter wind sweeping the room.

"I'll be walkin' west past Sol's at five this afternoon, and I'll be wearin' my hardware, Luke."

Surprise was a heavy weight on Luke's chin, pulling his mouth open. Anse's face went tight and strained, and he upset his glass with a convulsive reflex of his hand.

"Eb!" he cried.

Marshall swept him with a hard glance, and Anse fell silent.

The grin crept across Luke's face. "You gone crazy?"

"Five o'clock," Eb repeated and walked out through the doors.

Anse followed and caught up with him. "Eb, do you know what you said back there?"

"I know." Marshall's voice was calm. "I slept good last night, Anse, first time in months. I'll sleep better tonight."

He left Anse standing there, his face oddly contracted. Anse's concern built a warm glow inside Eb. It was good to have that kind of friends.

He went back to his room, and it was easy to fall into peaceful sleep. He awoke at four-thirty, checked his guns carefully and strapped them on. The weight at his hips was an old friend.

At five minutes to five he walked out of the hotel and turned west. He walked slowly, and his senses were sharp and keen. This was a good town, it would grow; his ranch could play an important part in the growth. Tomorrow he could catch up on some of the work he had neglected for so long.

The sun was almost level with the earth's rim, Mohawk's one street seemed to run squarely into it. Eb kept his eyes a few feet above the dusty road.

It was one minute to five when he passed the east end of Sol's porch. From the corners of his eyes Eb could see the men standing well back in doorways, behind pillars. They watched his every move with morbidly intent eye. Eb allowed himself a twisted grin.

The news of his challenge had spread.

A heavy figure turned into the street just above Sol's store. It walked towards Eb with slow, measured paces. The distance was fifty feet, forty, thirty.

"Pull, damn you," Luke bellowed hoarsely. "I'm givin' you that much."

Eb kept his eyes on the booted feet. They were almost even with the west end of Sol's porch; they faltered, then stopped.

"Now, Luke." Marshall's voice was a croak. His hands moved downward towards the sagging holsters. His mind willed them to speed with desperate intensity, but he couldn't overcome the handicap of those crippled paws. He knew his motions were dreadfully slow, like a man in a dream walk. He heard the heavy slap of Luke's gun, and the slug whined overhead. He was pulling his own guns now, and they came out of the leather like hoof that were sunk deep in mud. Luke's second shot sang its ugly song over his head, and a third

one whispered past Eb's ear. He heard another boom and his sombrero was tugged violently from his head.

FOUR shots before Eb Marshall's guns had even started to talk, but they were talking now. He sensed, rather than heard the twin sullen roar, felt the heavy recoils against his gnarled hands.

He saw one of those booted legs take a slow step forward, and thought with grim certainty he hadn't stopped' Luke. He threw more lead, then the booted leg seemed to falter as though it had become unhinged. Luke's shoulders came into view, then his face hung there for a long moment.

Eb's breath left him in a sob. For the first time he realized Luke hadn't been firing after his fourth shot, that no lead had sung by or touched him.

"Hit him with the first shot," he whispered. He walked towards Luke, and his steps were slow. He stood over the fallen man, and there was nothing in his eyes.

Anse came across the street and awe stamped his features. "You blew his belly wide open, Eb. You cut him in two. He couldn't fall. Everytime he started, you slammed a dead shot, but he didn't touch you." He didn't say it, but his tone mirrowed his thoughts. *you were slow, Eb. I saw it, but I still don't believe it.*

Anse said slowly "It was almost like he didn't want to hit you. Like a light had struck him."

Eb Marshall faced towards Sol's store. The light of the setting sun hit the west window of those banked hand mirrors, and bounced back into Eb's eyes. He bobbed his head to avoid its blinding effect.

He was suddenly old and tired. He gripped Anse's arm, and the support was welcome. "I'll buy you a drink, Anse. We'll just leave it that way; a light hit him."

This gal called herself Estrelita, but I knew her when she was a peeler in Chi. So I went to renew old acquaintances — only somebody wanted to

KILL THE WENCH DEAD

by H. C. BUTLER

Kirk Lowe liked brown-eyed gals, liked to find them in a spot where they needed him. But he hadn't counted on being the bait in a

BLONDE MANTRAP

by Wade D. Rubottom

You'll find these, and many other stories in the new

CRACK DETECTIVE and MYSTERY STORIES

The December issue is now on sale

SHE WORE A SILVER CONCHA

Novelet by W. C. Tuttle

The only clue to who had shot old Frank Blair was a broken silver concha. But someone who's gotten away with a shooting, and has successfully engineered one frameup, will try again if the occasion's there. And success in crime breeds fatal overconfidence...

STEVE BLAIR rode into the main street of Ghost Lake and tied his tall sorrel to the little hitch-rack in front of the sheriff's office. No one paid any attention to him. Riding cowboys were a dime-a-dozen in Ghost Lake. Steve was six feet four inches tall, a hard-faced specimen, looking older than his twenty-six years.

A little over two years ago, Blair had gone to the penitentiary for cattle rustling, linked to the wrist of Jim Morgan, the present sheriff. Steve remembered all this very well—but he was a free man now—and back in Ghost Lake.

Jim Morgan looked up from the papers on his desk as Blair's figure blocked out the light from the doorway. Morgan was a big man, too, grizzled and capable, the county couldn't afford less than a capable sheriff. Steve came slowly up to the desk, where they looked at each other.

There was no greeting, friendly or otherwise. After looking at each other for several moments, Blair said quietly, "I'll take my guns, Jim."

"Guns?" queried Marshall. "Your—oh, yes, I remember now."

He spun around in his chair and went to the old safe, where he took out the two guns, rolled in a heavily-stamped leather belt, and placed them on the desk.

Morgan remembered those guns. Evey time he opened his safe, he had breathed a prayer that Steve Blair would never come back to claim them. A matched pair of Bisley Model, Colt forty-fives, were not easy to find and acquire.

"Old Frank saw the gun, but not the man who held it . . . "

There was a flash of envy in his eyes as he watched Steve unroll that heavy belt, buckle it around his narrow waist, and adjust the holsters. Both belt and holsters were heavily stamped, the butts of both guns angling out for a quick draw.

"I don't want to preach, Steve, but—"

"Don't," said Steve quietly.

Morgan shrugged. Steve Blair had never been one to accept unasked for advice—and those two years had not made him more receptive.

"I suppose the old man kept in touch with you, Steve."

Blair looked at him bleakly. "I wrote to him, if that's what you mean, Jim. You know dad couldn't write."

Morgan was a bit amazed as he stared at the tall cowboy. "Steve, you mean—you—you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"What happened to your father?"

Blair's palms rubbed slowly over the butts of his two guns, his eyes searching the sheriff's face. "What," he asked quietly.

"Steve, are you sure you haven't heard—"

"Keep talking."

"You knew he got shot, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, I don't see why somebody didn't—"

"Stop wondering—and start talking, Jim."

"All right. The night after I took

you away, somebody knocked on the door of the ranch-house. Your father went to the door and flung it open. Somebody shot him."

"You mean—they killed him?"

"Better if they had—maybe. The doctors done what they could, Steve but he's paralyzed from his waist down."

Blair's lips went white, what there was of them in sight. "Is he—out at the ranch?"

Jim Morgan drew a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. "Steve, you've got to know it all. I don't know why in hell it had to be me—doin' the telling. Your father lost the ranch—on a mortgage."

Blair swayed in a little closer, staring down at the sheriff. "There wasn't any mortgage. You're lying to me, Jim."

"I'm not in the habit of lying, Steve. He owed the bank ten thousand dollars, borrowed money—on a note. They took it over.

"Borrowed money?"

"That's right. When the bank took over, Larry Harper, Shell Romaine and Horace Toland made up a partnership to develop the gold mine they found on the ranch. They're doing very well."

Blair shook his head. "Dad paralyzed, ranch gone, gold mine. My gawd, I must have been away more than two years."

"It—it went kinda fast, Steve. 'Course we didn't notice it, being here all the time—"

"Where's my father, Jim?"

"You remember the old Harris shack, out a little ways along the road."

Blair turned and walked out of the office. Jim Morgan watched him mount the tall sorrel and rein away from the rack. Then he took his hat and went out to spread the word that Steve Blair was back—and had collected his two guns.

THE OLD Harris shack was just that. One room in size, the outside sand-blasted, sun scorched, a few of the cracks battened. There was no fence, no yard, no grass, no trees—only sand and rocks. Old Frank Blair was there, sitting in a home-made wheelchair in the shade of the front; hunched, a mop of white hair, some of it down over his deep-set eyes, claw-like hands clutching the wheels, as he watched Steve ride up and dismount. Blair had weighed one hundred and eighty—now he was a scant hundred. He looked like a crippled eagle as he gripped the wheels.

Steve came over to him and they looked at each other. No handshake, no show of emotion. The old man's cackling laugh held no trace of humor as he said, "Tell me I look like hell, and let it go at that, Steve."

"Why didn't you let me know?" asked Steve quietly. "Somebody could have written me."

"Son, I figured you had enough hell up there without me addin' my pinch of brimstone."

Steve sat down against the rough boards and sifted sand through his powerful fingers, his eyes straight ahead. After a while he looked at the wheelchair, and at his father. On the righthand side a holster had been built in, the black-handled gun in easy reach of the old man's right hand.

"Blacksmith made it for me," he said. "Pretty good job, too. I can git around, do my own cookin', housekeepin'."

"Jim Morgan told me about the ranch, Dad."

"Oh! Anythin' else?"

"About the gold mine. Where'd they find it?"

"They didn't, son; I figure Josh Wylie found it and talked too blasted much. Hell, I ran him off the ranch twice. Hole-diggin' old fool!"

"What did he get out of the find?"

"Him? Oh, he died."

"Josh Wylie died, eh?"

"Kicked to death in the feed corral. Got drunk as a fool, got into the cor-

Steve tied the man, quickly.

ral with some wild stock, and they found him next mornin'. I didn't know it until I got my brains back. Flat on my back at the time."

"What about that mortgage. I didn't know you had one."

The old man stared into space for a while, as though trying to get his facts straight. Finally he said, "You was in jail, Steve. I—I knowed about a high-priced lawyer that might clear you. Didn't have enough cash to swing the deal, so I asked Larry Harper, at the bank, about some money. He said the bank would loan me ten thousand on my personal note for sixty days."

Frank Blair looked at Steve, who wasn't even looking at him, and continued, "I didn't read that note, Steve. Hell, I—all right, I signed the damn thing, took the money home with me—and got shot. Who remembers money when they can't move, can't think? Sixty days goes mighty quick."

After a long pause, he said, "That note was backed by the whole ranch and everythin' on it. After sixty days the bank foreclosed on it. You know, son—I thought Harper was my friend."

"A man's only friend is his gun and his horse, Dad."

NEITHER of them spoke for a long time. A lizard ran up on

Steve's boot and stretched, looking up at him with its beady eyes. He reached down slowly and cupped the lizard in his hand. "Tame little devil," he said quietly.

"Yeah. Pretty good company for me, Steve."

Steve opened his fist and the lizard merely moved a few inches away. "See anything of Clint Loughran?"

"No—not lately. He rode up here one day, askin' if there was anythin' he co ' l do for me."

"He did, eh? Nice of him."

"It sure was. I appreciated him doin' that."

Steve looked at his father quizzically. "W at did you tell him?"

"I told him to git to hell away from here, before I blew his damn head off."

"But what are you living on, Dad?"

"That ten thousand dollars I borrowed. I hid it at the ranch—got it hid here, too. Can't take no chances."

"Dad, who do you think shot you that night?"

"If I knew, do you think he'd be alive now? There's one clue, Steve—just one."

The old man dug inside his shirt and brought out an object that flashed in the sunlight. It was a solid silver concha, at least three inches in diameter, beautifully engraved with a bucking horse and rider, a circle of cattle brands around the outer edge. Steve looked it over carefully. Apparently a bullet had scored part of it, leaving some lead in the deeper engraving. He looked at his father quizzically.

"Doc Roberts found it the mornin' after I was shot," he said. "It was on the path, about thirty feet from the porch. Doc had an idea maybe I lost it there, I never told him different. Steve, one of my bullets cut that off the man's chaps. You can see on the back, where the force of the bullet tore it loose from the leather."

"That thing cost real money," said Steve. "Hand made—solid silver." After a minute inspection he looked at his father.

"Find the man who wore it."

The old man laughed and shook his head. "No use, Steve; I've read every pair of chaps and belts that ever came into the town. Mebbe some dirty killer is still wonderin' what became of it."

"I reckon I better go back to the livery-stable and put up my horse."

"Son, I've been wonderin'—wonderin'."

"Wonderin' about what?"

"Why you ain't asked about Susie."

After a few moments Steve looked at him. "What about Susie?"

"Workin' at the post-office now. I hear that her and Dick Romaine are goin' to get married."

Steve drew a deep breath, but his voice was steady, as he said, "I suppose she knows best." He got slowly to his feet. "I'll put up my horse."

"Be careful, Steve; they'll all be watchin'."

"I'll be watching, too, Dad."

- 2 -

AB PIERCE, who ran the livery-stable, was standing in the wide doorway as Steve rode up. Ab was a wizened little old rawhider, a long-time friend of Steve. He merely moved back and motioned for young Blair to ride in. Once inside and dismounted, Pierce was the first man to shake hands with Steve in Ghost Lake.

"You look good, Ab." Steve said soberly.

"Barrin' the fact that I've got three, four bad kidneys, hate hell out of my job, and gettin' kinda forgetful, I'm all right, Steve." Pierce hesitated and looked away. "You've done heard it all, I reckon."

"Yes, I guess I have."

"Why'd you come back, Steve? Oh, I don't mean that—exactly."

"I know. Jailbird comes home, Ab? Tell me something—how did Josh get killed?"

Pierce looked sharply at Steve, his eyes quizzical. "Wylie? Oh, yeah. Well, the law said he was kicked to death by five horses in my feed corral."

"Kicked to death, eh?"

"Kicked and tromped, I reckon. Same thing. Doc Roberts said his head was cut from steel horseshoes, I dunno—I never looked at him. I never was much of a hand to be curious about a dead man."

"Got drunk, and—"

"*They* say he was drunk—I never seen him; not until next mornin'. Pretty messy. They didn't put me on the stand at the inquest."

"Why, Ab?"

"I allus did talk too damn much," replied Pierce soberly. "It's one of my worst failin's."

"Somebody didn't want you to talk?"

Ab shrugged. "They didn't call me."

"Maybe they figured you didn't know anything—or did you?

"Mebbe not—I dunno." Ab lowered his voice. "All I did know was on that on all five of them *cruel* horses—there wasn't a damn single shoe."

Steve looked at him thoughtfully. Ab Pierce wet his lips and took hold of young Blair's sleeve. "That's just between us, Steve," he said. "I hate this job, but it's a livin'. I'd kinda hate to lose it."

"Who owns the stable, Ab?"

"The bank."

"Oh, I see. It's just between us Ab—and thanks."

Steve left the stable, but instead of going back to the old shack, he wandered up and down the main street. People he knew avoided him. Steve was grimly amused. He knew that he wa. innocent of stealing calves from Clint Loughran and his Bar L ranch; but the law had put its own brand on him: Steve Blair, Rustler.

Frank Blair had managed to wheel his old chair into the shack, and was peeling some potatoes to fry for supper, when someone knocked on the door. He wiped his hands on his overalls, loosened his gun in the holster and swung his chair around. "Come in!" he rasped.

The door swung open and Susie Ronson stood there, holding a paper-wrapped parcel in her two hands. Susie was twenty-four, and perhaps she wasn't the most beautiful girl on earth, but she was the prettiest girl around Ghost Lake. She lived with her mother in a small cottage, and worked in the post-office.

It was generally known that she was to marry Steve Blair, but that ended sharply when Steve was arrested. Susie never went to the trial, never saw Steve again. It was what he wanted.

"I—I brought you an apple pie, Mr. Blair," she said. "Mother and I made some this morning, and I thought you'd like one."

"I sure would, Susie."

"I knew you would. I'll put it on the table for you." She looked around the room, shaking her head.

"Looks bad, huh?" he asked soberly.

"You can't help it," she said. "I'll come over in the morning and clean up the place."

FRANK BLAIR looked thoughtfully at the girl. "I heard that you and Dick Romaine are gettin' married pretty soon."

Susie flushed quickly. "You did?"

After a few moments, she added, "If you listen closely you'll hear a lot of things in Ghost Lake, Mr. Blair."

"I should know that, Susie. How's your mother?"

"She's pretty well, thank you. Well, I'll be going. See you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Susie."

She smiled at him and stepped outside, almost into Steve. Her eyes were wide as she looked at him.

"Hello, Susie."

"Hello Steve. Why, I just brought your father a—Steve, where on earth did you come from?"

He looked at her soberly, thoughtfully.

"I—I didn't mean that—that question, Steve."

"I had to come back, Susie," he said simply.

"Had to, Steve?"

"To find out—things. You see, nobody told me."

"Steve, you mean—you didn't know—about him?"

"Steve, shook his head slowly. "Not about anything."

Instinctively, they both looked back through the doorway; but the old man had wheeled over to the stove and was rattling pans, paying no attention to them.

Susie turned and looked at Steve. "I'll have to be going."

Steve looked over at the main street, nodded slowly. "I know," he said gently. "It's all right, Susie."

She turned and walked away, not looking back.

Nights in the desert country are cold, and Steve didn't sleep too well in a single blanket on a hard floor. He was up at daylight, dressed and opened the front door, where he stood and looked out across the hills. He had longed and dreamed of looking at them again for two years, but they didn't seem to mean much to him now.

Wedged in a crack in the step was a piece of paper. Steve dug it out and opened it. Printed in smudged pencil was the message; GHOST LAKE DON'T LIKE RUSTLERS. START MOVING.

Steve read it grimly, crushed it in his hand and finally put it in his pocket. The old man, wrestling with a pair of overalls on the bed, called, "Start a fire, will you, Steve?"

"I probably will," breathed Steve, and went back to the stove.

LATER IN the morning Dick Romaine came to town, took a couple of drinks at the *Smoke Tree Saloon*, and went down to the sheriff's office. Jim Morgan was not in very good humor. He had played poker most of the night at the *Smoke Tree*, and lost enough to make him irritable.

Romaine had always been known as a "fancy" cowboy, but his added income from the mine on the FL spread had made him blossom further. He was tall, well-built, about thirty-five, rather good-looking, and very fond of Dick Romaine. "I hear that Steve Blair is back in town," he said.

Morgan took a pile of papers from his desk, piled them on top of his safe and turned to look at him. "You ought to," he admitted, "you was in town last night—and everybody was talkin' about him."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"I hear he's got a chip on his shoulder."

The sheriff nodded slowly, "Yeah, and two guns."

"Is that supposed to be a funny remark—or are you siding in with a rustler?"

"As a matter of fact, Steve Blair paid the price the law asked. And as far as this office is concerned, he now has the same rights as you or anybody else, Dick."

"That's a hell of a way to look at it!"

Morgan looked at him narrowly. It was the first time he had known Dick to adopt a holier-than-thou attitude. "Are you scared of Steve Blair?"

"Scared of *him?*"

"That was my question."

Romaine looked just a bit concerned, perhaps a little angry. "Why should I be scared of Steve Blair?"

"If you remember, Dick, while Steve was on the way to the penitentiary somebody shot Frank Blair—shot him down in the doorway of his ranchhouse—and crippled him for life. The

bank took away his ranch and cattle. Steve didn't know any of those things until I told him about it yesterday."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that *somebody* has a perfect right to be scared of Steve Blair."

"Are you insinuating that I—"

"Hold your loop!" interrupted the sheriff. "Ever since you got in on that gold mine, you've been tin-goddin' around here, actin' like you owned the earth. I'm not insinuatin' a thing—merely saying that Steve Blair is back, wearin' his two guns."

The sheriff paused, eyeing Romaine. "If you're scared, it's all right with me, and you don't need to answer that question—I know the answer."

Dick Romaine walked back to the doorway, where he turned and faced the sheriff again. "One of these days," he said quietly," there'll be another election, Morgan."

"There usually is," agreed the sheriff; "but I have a feeling that the next voting list may be a little short."

ROMAINE went back to the *Smoke Tree,* boiling inside. Horace Toland, owner of the *Smoke Tree,* was at the bar, immaculate even at this time in the morning, wearing all the habiliments of a professional gambler. Romaine moved in beside him at the bar.

"Something gnawing at you this morning, Dick?"

"Me—why?"

"Well, you don't look happy."

"I was talking to our estimable sheriff."

"Take a drink and wash the taste out of your mouth," suggested Toland. He squinted quizzically at Romaine, who poured his own drink, spilling a little of it. "Steve Blair?"

Romaine took the full glass at a gulp, clattered the glass back on the polished bar and leaned his shoulders against it, looking around the almost empty room.

"What about Blair?" asked Toland curiously.

Romaine looked bleakly at Toland and started to say something, but Larry Harper, the banker, was coming in for his morning drink. Harper was middle-aged, gray-haired, rather plump and well dressed. He looked at them curiously as he came up between them, and nodded to the bartender.

"Seen Blair yet?" asked Toland.

Harper started to pour his drink, but hesitated. He put the bottle down and looked at them narrowly.

"Why worry about him?" he asked. "If he gets too smart, back he goes. I've talked with our prosecuting attorney."

"A hell of a lot of good that does, when you've got a bullet in your belly," growled Romaine.

"Bullet in your belly?" queried Harper. "Dick, use common sense. Blair hasn't anythng on you—or any of us. We're as safe as a church. Have a drink—and forget it."

"I'll have a drink."

"After all," said Toland," Blair hasn't any corner on guns. What did Morgan say that riled you?"

"He shot off his mouth. Between me and you, he's backin' Steve Blair."

"You're crazy!"

"Maybe I am."

"And looking for boogers," laughed Harper, slapping Dick on the back. "Drink up—forget Steve Blair."

"Like I said before, I'll take a drink," said Romaine grimly.

He gulped his drink and walked out, leaving the banker and the gambler standing at the bar, looking after him.

"Our fancy friend might be a problem," said Harper.

"In just what way?"

"I've always figured that Dick was a fool, normally. His kind, when they get scared—who knows?"

"Why worry? Like you told him—we're as safe as a church."

"That's what I told *him.* How about another drink?"

- 3 -

STEVE AND his father were cleaning up their breakfast dishes, when Doctor Roberts came up to the shack. Steve had known the old practitioner nearly all his life. After shaking hands with Steve he said to the old man, "Just dropped up to see how you're feeling, Frank."

Steve knew the doctor was lying. His father had told him that he hadn't seen the doctor for months. Roberts sat down in their one chair, while Steve sat on the bunk. The talk was desultory. No one seemed to know how to start a conversation. Finally Steve said, bluntly, "Doc, what killed Josh Wylie?"

The doctor peered at Steve. "Why—why, didn't they tell you? He was kicked to death in the feed corral, over two years ago."

"Horseshoes weren't luck for him, eh?"

Roberts shook his head sadly, "Poor Josh's head was covered with deep cuts from shod hoofs."

"Couldn't you tell whether Josh was drunk when this happened?"

"Why—uh—no, I don't believe we—they said he left the *Smoke Tree* too drunk to know his own name."

"Who were *they,* Doc?"

"I really don't recall just who said it. Seemed to be generally known that—"

"Wait, Doc," interrupted Steve. "You were the coroner—and you ought to know who said what. Did someone testify that Josh was that drunk—I mean, on the stand."

"No, I—I don't believe they did, Steve."

"Why wasn't Ab Peirce asked to testify? I heard that he was the one who found Josh's body."

"Testify? Why, I—I don't remember just how. After all, it was a plain case of—"

"Was it, Doc?"

"Why—I—certainly, it was. No two ways about it, Steve. I don't see what that has to do with you."

"Maybe not, Doc—but I'd like the record straight. It was testified at the inquest that Josh's head had been gouged and smashed by shod hoofs. Am I right?"

"That's right. As doctor, as well as coroner, I testified to my own findings."

"Did you examine those five horses at the feed corral?"

"Examine them? Examine them for what, Steve?"

"Doc, while you were testifying that Josh was killed with shod hoofs you didn't know what you were saying. Not one of those five horses in that corral had *ever* worn a shoe."

Roberts stared at Steve, pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow, and stared at Steve again. "Never worn a shoe," he repeated quietly. "The condition of Josh Wylie's head—"

"Surprised, Doc?" asked the old man, chuckling a little.

"Why, I—I don't just know, Frank."

HE SHOOK his head and looked back at Steve. "Steve, are you lying to me—coming back here, trying to start trouble. Haven't you had enough trouble without starting more."

Steve's face had all the expression of a wooden-Indian. "What would you say killed Josh, Doc?"

"Who told you those horses never wore shoes? You wasn't in this country—you couldn't know."

"That isn't an answer to my question—Doc—. What would you say now—or could a barefoot horse make those wounds?"

Roberts shook his head slowly. "No," he said finally. "No. I'll be going

back—more patients to visit—you know."

"I know, Doc," said Steve. "Glad you came."

Doc Roberts walked out and closed the door behind him. After a while the old man looked at Steve. "Glad you came home, son; I'm learnin' things I didn't know about somethin' that happened—and I was here, too."

Doctor Roberts went straight to the sheriff's office, where he told Jim Morgan about his conversation with Steve Blair. The sheriff didn't seem too surprised at what Steve had told the doctor. After his story was finished, the sheriff said, "I figured somethin' like that, Doc."

"You figured something like that, Jim? How could you?"

"That was simple, Doc. While all of us was down at your place, trying to find out how bad Josh was injured—somebody turned the five horses out of the corral. That was why Ab Pierce was not asked to testify."

After a long silence, the doctor got to his feet, started for the doorway, but came back to the desk. "Jim, do you believe Josh was murdered?"

Morgan looked at the doctor for several moments before he said, "Doc, we've both lived around here a long time—let's keep on livin', eh?"

Doc Roberts nodded and walked out slowly. Steve was coming down the sidewalk, going slowly, but Roberts cut across the street. He didn't want to talk with Steve now. Clint Loughran came riding down the street, pulled in at the *Smoke Tree* hitch-rack and dismounted. He saw Steve across the street and walked over to him. Loughran was as tall as young Blair, raw-boned, cold-jawed. They eyed each other for a few moments, when Loughran said, "Sore at me, Steve?"

"I never have been, Clint; no use being sore now."

"One of my boys was in town last night. Told me you came back."

"Any objections, Clint?"

"Not any."

"Thanks."

Clint Loughran hooked his thumbs over his gun-belt and looked closely at Steve, whose eyes never blinked nor wavered.

"Tough deal to come back to, Steve."

"Yeah," breathed Steve. "Awful tough, Clint."

"I went up—once—to see the old man. Told me to get to hell out of there."

"He told me, Clint."

"Did, eh? Whalebone warp, that feller. I like him."

"You like him?"

"Never whined, never kicked—just took it. Tough deal."

"Thanks, Clint."

"You're welcome, Steve."

LOUGHRAN turned and walked back across the street. Steve went on up to the little bank where Larry Harper, looking up from his desk, drew a deep breath—not of relief. Steve stood there across the narrow counter looking at him. It was embarrassing for the banker; he didn't know what to say, so decided to not say anything. Steve said, "Howdy."

It didn't mean anything, but it broke the ice. Harper got up and came over to the counter, holding out a pudgy hand to Steve, who ignored it completely. He tried to smile but it was only a grimace. "Steve, I'm—I'm glad to see you."

"Let's keep it honest," said Steve.

Harper drew back a little, his hand dropping to his side. "Apparently," he said quietly, "you don't want friendship."

"Not your kind, Harper. Your kind don't deal in that. You only deal in betraying friendships. You crooked my old man into signing a sixty-day mortgage on his ranch. I don't say you shot him, and foreclosed on the property before he could recover and sell enough

beef to pay it back—but that's what happened."

Steve never raised his voice. "Your kind are lower than the belly of a sidewinder in Death Valley, Harper. I just wanted you to know how I feel about you. Thanks for listening."

Steve turned and walked out, not even looking back. Larry Harper, trembling, sat down at his desk. His cashier, who came after Steve had left the valley, came over to him and Harper looked up at him. "Yes?" he asked huskily.

"Was that the Steve Blair I've heard folks talking about?"

Harper nodded and turned back to his papers.

"I saw a picture of him once."

Harper looked up quickly. "A picture of Steve Blair?"

"Could have been. I think it was painted by Remington or Russell. Certainly looked like him."

Just outside the bank, Steve met Susie Ronson. She was wearing a light, blue-gray suit. Maybe it was a cheap suit from a mail-order house, but it looked good in Ghost Lake. They both stopped short, and instinctively looked around. Then they both grinned.

"We better not talk—here," said Steve. Susie nodded.

Steve's eyes were looking at an ornament on the lapel of her suit, and Susie looked down at it.

"I got it for my birthday," she said simply.

"Mighty pretty," he said, still looking at it. Then he looked at her. "Nice to have seen you, Susie."

"Nice to have seen you, Steve."

Susie went on, but Steve didn't look back as he went slowly down the wooden sidewalk, deep in thought. The ornament on Susie's lapel was a cut-out of the bucking horse and rider on the concha that Frank Blair had. In Steve's mind there was no question that the ornament had been made from the matching concha. He dug his hands deep in his pockets, as he considered this new development, and his hand came in contact with the note he had found that morning. He tore it into small bits and sifted them along the sidewalk. Then, with a whimsical smile on his lips, he whispered, quoting from the note, "Get going, eh? I believe I have."

LATER THAT afternoon Steve rode out to the old ranch. The main ranch-house had been taken over by the miners, but few changes had been made. *No Trespassing* signs were everywhere in evidence, even on the locked main gate, which bore the sign KEEP OUT. FOR OFFICIAL BUSINESS ONLY.

IT WAS dark when Steve got back to the old shack. Supper was ready. He told his father about the old ranch-house, as seen from the road, and the warning signs. The old man's only comment was, "They sure got a lot for ten thousand dollars. I hear they net more than that a month."

After supper, Steve led his horse to the livery-stable. He was cautious now—remembering the penciled warning. The big doors of the stable were wide open, a lantern burning at the end of a stall.

He unsaddled outside the stall, hung up his saddle and led the sorrel onto the stall. As he leaned in to tie the rope to the manger, something crashed down on his head.

Steve had no idea what happened to him, nor how long it had been since it happened, but he awoke with a blinding headache, strapped on his belly to a saddle, and on a moving horse. It was too dark to distinguish passing objects, but he seemed to feel that he was high in the hills, traveling slowly over a trail.

Brush seemed to yank at his clothes. It hurt too much for him to lift his head. Gradually he became fully conscious, and he remembered taking his horse into the stall. He tried to test his

arms, and the ropes seemed loose. In fact, he pulled his right hand completely loose, feeling around along the fender of the saddle. The ropes which bound him had been poorly tied; one rope sagged badly. He grasped it in his hand and yanked on it—not for any definite reason, except it was loose. Apparently it drew up tight under the flanks of the horse, because the next moment Steve felt the horse buckle in the middle, and it seemed to be flying into the air.

The next few moments were filled with dips, whirls and crashes. Steve felt himself flying, partly loose, crashing into brush. Then he was completely loose, crashing into more brush, rolling and falling, but finally coming to an abrupt stop.

Things were rather blank for him at this time. He dimly heard voices. It seemed that a man, a great distance away, was yelling something about "getting hell" from somebody.

Steve knew he was lying on a steep hillside, his feet much higher than his head. Except for his aching head, he felt little pain. He managed to lift a hand and feel of his face, which felt wet and sticky. He could hear brush cracking, and he finally heard a man saying, "Here's the horse—deader'n hell."

They crashed around a few minutes longer, and he heard the same voice say, "It's too damn dark to find him. Next thing we know, we'll both fall in the bottom. He's got to be around here."

"I wonder what happened," complained another voice.

"Aw, somethin' spooked that blasted roan off the trail. We'll have to wait until daylight. Got to find him, or we don't get our money."

In spite of his predicament, Steve had to smile. Somebody had paid these two men to kidnap him—but why? And who? The men did no more talking. Steve had no idea what time it was, nor how long they would have to wait until daylight. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he managed to turn around and head uphill. Every muscle in his body rebelled, but he forced himself to snake along carefully, quietly digging his elbows into the dirt, trying to avoid breaking any dry sticks.

It seemed days later when he reached the trail on top of the hog-back ridge. There was a little more light up there, and he saw two saddled horses near him, tied to an old manzanita snag. Steve sat on the trail a long time, trying to gather strength enough to get to his feet. The horses moved uneasily, but made no attempt to pull away as he managed to limp up to them.

He untied both of them, managed to get into a saddle and drove the other horse ahead of him down the trail. He heard a man yelling down in the brush, but it meant nothing now. He was free again, with a horse between his knees. Something tied to the fork of the saddle annoyed him until he discovered it was his own belt and one gun. The other holster was there, but the gun was missing.

- 4 -

FRANK BLAIR hadn't been to bed. The old alarm clock on top of the rickety cupboard showed nearly two o'clock. On the table a smoky oil lamp barely lighted the shack, throwing a huge shadow of the old man and his wheelchair against the wall. The only sound was the ticking of the clock. The old man was hunched, grim-faced, jaw set tightly.

He heard a horse pull up in front of the shack. Easily he slipped the heavy Colt from his wheelchair holster, leaning forward a little as the door opened and Steve came in. He stopped short, looked at the old man, closed the door and came forward a little.

"You're a hell of a lookin' mess," said the old man.

Steve had no comments. The old man's keen eyes noted that Steve had only one gun. He said, "They said you forgot and left one gun on the floor."

Steve moved in closer. "Gun on the floor?" he queried wearily. "What floor?"

"Floor of the bank—in front of the opened safe."

In front of the opened safe?

"Why'd you come back here?" he asked. "They'll get you before mornin', Steve. Morgan's got a posse out now—lookin' for you."

Steve was closer to the lamp now, and the old man's searching eyes traveled over him slowly. "You look worse than I thought, Steve. Head all busted up, most of your shirt gone. What happened?"

Steve sat down on the bunk, rubbing his sore hands on his knees.

"Damn shack was full of people, lookin' for you. They said you kidnapped Larry Harper, forced him to unlock the safe at the bank, and cleaned it out. You had him all tied up and gagged in a chair, and then you bashed him over the head."

Steve merely looked at him dumbly.

"Dick Romaine was here, Clint Loughran, Toland, Morgan, and all of them. Doc Roberts says Harper may not die, but he sure got bashed awful hard. They found your gun on the floor in front of the open safe."

The old man paused, "I ain't askin', Steve—I'm just tellin'."

Steve stood there, flexing his aching muscles. A trickle of blood ran down from a cut over his left eye, but he ignored it. "I went to put my horse up," he said wearily, "when I got hit over the head. I woke up, tied to a saddle, high in the hills, dark as hell. Two men, I think."

The trickle of blood ran into a corner of his lips, and he spat it out viciously. He shook his head. "I dunno—much about it. One hand was free and I pulled on a rope. Maybe it was like pulling a flank-strap on a bronc. Next thing I knew I was like a kite on a string, and not enough tail to keep it from ducking and diving. Funny feeling—and then we landed. I heard one of the men say that the horse was dead. They said they had to get me, or they'd never collect the money. Then I snaked my way up that steephill.

"I found their two horses up there on the trail. I was drunk as a fool from that wallop on the head, but I left the two men on foot up there. Tied to the fork of the saddle was my belt and one gun."

"Steve," asked the old man quietly, "are you—rememberin' things right?"

"No," replied Steve painfully. "Neither one of us. You tell me a crazy story and I tell you a crazy story."

After a while Steve said, "I've got to stable that horse," and started for the door.

"You'd be crazy to go up there," protested the old man. "Hell, the whole town is lookin' for you, Steve."

"Looking for me in the hills, Dad—I'm in town."

ABOUT THE only visible light on the main street was from the *Smoke Tree Saloon*. The big sliding doors of the stable had been closed, but Steve shoved one of them back carefully. The old lantern was still lighted, hanging on a nail at the first stall. Steve wondered where Ab Pierce was as he tied his borrowed horse in the vacant stall, not removing the saddle.

Steve was very weary and undecided; there was a pile of old blankets in a corner, shielded from the smoky lantern, and he sat down. Strangely enough, he was not worried about the search being made for him; so he relaxed and went to sleep.

Something awakened him an hour or so later. It was the dim figure of a man coming in from the doorway, limping painfully, but quietly. The man went to

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the rear of the stall and looked in for several moments. Then he went in and untied the horse, bringing it out with him. A few feet away from the stall, he dropped the reins and hurried out.

Steve was wide awake now, wondering what this was all about, until the man came back, leading Steve's sorrel, saddled and bridled. Steve got to his feet as the man went into the stall to tie the horse, and moved swiftly over to a corner of the stall. The man, confident now that his job was about over, came out; as he cleared the end of the stall, Steve hit him squarely on the chin with a punch that would have knocked down a steer.

The man collapsed instantly, striking his head against the side of the stall as he fell. Steve stepped back, blowing on his numbed knuckles, and looked around.

Ten feet away, against the wall, was an oat-box, at least six feet long, with a hinged cover. Steve flung back the top, intending to lock the unconscious man in the box; but what he saw made him jerk back, whirl and quickly secure the lantern. Flat on his back in the box was Ab Pierce, the left side of his head bathed in partly-dried gore.

There was no question in Steve's mind that. Ab was dead. Slowly he lowered the lid, dazed, then walked over to the horse and examined him by the lantern-light. The Circle R brand was plain, but the saddle bore no identification marks.

There was not a soul on the street, not even a light, as Steve closed the stable door and walked back to the old shack. It would soon be daylight. Steve had never seen the man he had knocked out in the stable—had no idea who he might be. He had taken over a Circle R, which meant, probably, that he worked for Dick Romaine.

Old Frank was still awake, hunched in his wheelchair. He eyed Steve

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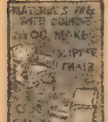

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closely. "You took a hell of a long time to stable one horse."

"I had to tie him tight, Dad. You better get to bed."

"We ain't goin' to bed, Son; we're goin' to talk—and we ain't got a hell of a lot of time left."

Steve sat down on the edge of the bunk and looked at the old man. "More things happened," said Steve, "a while ago."

"Still dreamin'?" asked the old, man.

"Yeah. I dreamed I went into the stable to put up that Circle R horse. I dreamed I sat down against the wall, where it was pretty dark, and a man came in. I don't know who he was. He took the Circle R horse out of the stall, brought in my horse and saddle and tied him in the stall.

"When he came out of the stall I hit him on the jaw and he hit his head against the stall-post. Then," Steve rubbed his head violenly with both hands and looked back at the old man.

"I dreamed I was going to hide him in the oat-box, but Ab Bill Pierce was already in the oat-box, dead as a nail. Somebody bashed him over the head."

"When you dream, you go whole-hog, Steve."

"Two horses don't always make one nightmare, Dad."

"Circle R, eh?" muttered the old man. "Playin' two-card Monte with horses. Hm-m-m-m."

The old man drew a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. "Steve, Jim Morgan is a pretty good friend of mine. He'll listen to reason. As things stand right now, you're only a look, whoop and a brook from a hangman's knot, Son. Ready to listen to a crazy scheme?"

"Maybe I'm still dreaming, but go ahead, Dad."

JIM MORGAN stood in the doorway of his office. It was early, but sunlight flooded the main street of Ghost

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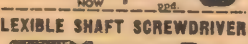

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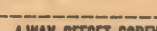

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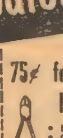

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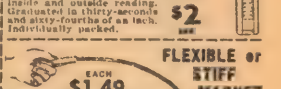

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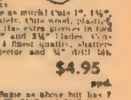

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Lake. Beside the doorway and against the wall was Frank Blair in his old wheelchair. Eight other men were there, just at the edge of the wooden sidewalk. Across the street was a hitch-rack filled with saddle horses.

Only Dick Romaine had his saddled horse, holding the reins. Clint Loughran was in the crowd, all of them looking at the sheriff and Frank Blair.

"All right, Jim," said Romaine, "there's been too damn much talk and no action. Don't tell me there's no evidence that Steve Blair didn't kill Pierce. No man stables a horse and don't take off the saddle, unless he's scared—too scared to remember to take it off."

The other men growled their assent.

"And," added Romaine, "you can't deny that he held up the bank."

"Hold it!" said one of the men warningly.

Susie Ronson was coming down the street on her way to the post office. She looked curiously at the crowd of men, started to walk past, but stopped near the old man in the wheelchair. Susie hadn't heard the latest news about Steve. Romaine looked grimly at her, started to say something, but changed his mind. The old man reached out and touched her on the arm. "Better run along, Susie," he whispered.

But Susie didn't run along; something impelled her to stay. The sheriff shrugged and looked at the cold-jawed

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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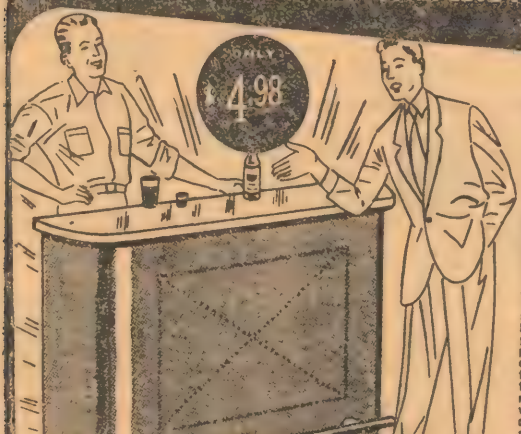

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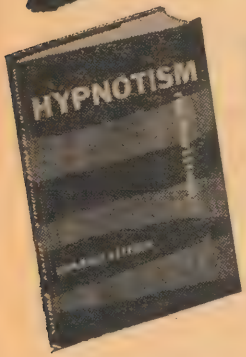

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men who had volunteered to act as a posse. "Frank Blair brought me a message," he said slowly.

"Message about what?" asked Romaine flatly.

"He said that Steve would be down in a few minutes—to explain every thin'."

It seemed that every man looked in the direction of the old shack, not visible from there.

"You mean—he's in town?" asked Loughran.

"Explain about *what?*" asked Romaine anxiously.

"You might ask Frank Blair," replied the sheriff quietly.

Dick Romaine put the one booted foot on the wooden sidewalk, looking directly at the old man "All right—you tell it."

"For one thing," said the old man calmly, "it concerns a silver concha. You've seen 'em, Dick."

"Silver concha?" Romaine shot a glance at Susie.

"Yeah," breathed the old man. "A silver concha that was shot off the chaps of the man who crippled me for life. The man never knew what became of that concha—but he didn't take any chances—he hid the others."

The old man drew a deep breath, leaned back, his fingers near the butt of that old .45. Not a man in the crowd had moved.

"But that man made a mistake, Dick," continued the old man. "He had one of them conchas altered. Made a nice pin—for a girl to wear."

Susie's hand went instinctively to where the lapel of the blue suit would have been, had she been wearing it. Romaine tried to ignore it, but the knuckles of his left hand, gripping his reins, were white.

"Talk, talk, talk!" he rasped. "Listenin' to an old fool—"

"Keep on talkin' Frank," interrupted the sheriff.

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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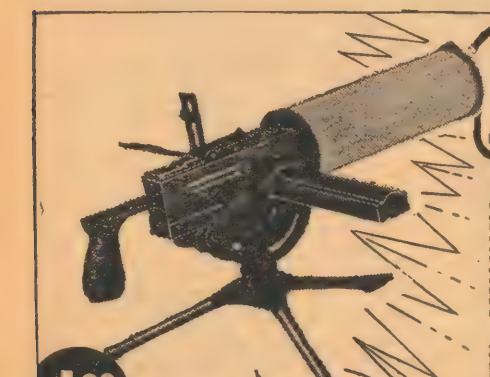

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"Thanks, Frank. Then there was Josh Wylie, Dick. You remember Josh. Maybe he wanted too much of a split on that gold mine—maybe he talked too much. The coroner's jury said that Wylie was kicked to death with shod hoofs on wild horses. Pierce swore there wasn't a shod horse in that corral. Somebody killed Pierce last night."

SUSIE HAD grasped the old man's left shoulder, fingers tight. But Frank Blair paid no attention: he said, "Last night some men tried to kill Larry Harper in the bank, and left Steve's gun as evidence, after they knocked Steve out, packed him on a horse and headed into the hills. But Steve got loose. Them two men talked, Dick—talked while they tried to find Steve in the buckbrush of that mountain. What they said can hang a man —and his name ain't Steve Blair."

Romaine's fingers loosened on the reins and they dropped into the dust as he stared at the old man, his eyes desperate. Someone said quietly, tensely, "Hold it—here comes Horace Toland."

No one spoke nor moved as the big gambler came up to them. He looked them over. "Everybody struck dumb?" he asked curiously.

No one answered him. The sheriff was looking up the street, and they all followed his gaze, shading their eyes, looking up the street against the sun.

It was Steve Blair, coming slowly down the middle of the dusty street. They all recognized him. A little dust swirled away from his slow-moving steps, coming closer all the time. Toland looked at the men. Romaine backed up a few steps, almost into Toland, who whispered, "What's going on, Dick?"

Romaine didn't answer. He stepped forward and grabbed at the loose reins, but the sudden action, made the horse whirl away. Desperately Romaine fol-

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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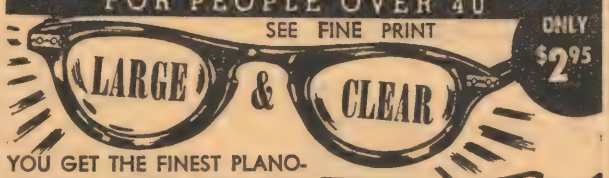

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lowed the horse into the middle of the street, but the animal avoided him.

Steve was not over a hundred feet away now, coming steadily, his eyes centered on Dick Romaine. Toland suddenly seemed to realize that something was wrong. He swung back his long coat, exposing his belt and holstered gun.

But the old man's voice snapped, "Hold it, Toland!"

Toland held it, because the old man's forty-five was centered on him. Susie was behind the chair now, a hand over her mouth, as she watched Steve coming down the street. He was not over fifty feet away now, still coming.

Dick Romaine was trying to brace his feet—trying to brace his nerve, too. Then he went for his gun.

ROMAINE was as fast as a striking rattler with a gun, but drew too fast and shot too fast; his bullet went wild, striking in the dust ten feet in front of Steve. A split-second later Dick was spinning sideways, his gun flying into the dust. He went to his haunches, grasping at the air for support and went flat in the dusty street.

The sheriff still stood in the doorway, showing all the emotions of a man watching a sporting event in which he had no favorites, no bets. Steve came on slowly until he stood over Dick Romaine. Romaine got up on one elbow, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"Better talk fast, Dick," said Steve coldly.

"Talk?" gasped Romaine. "What good—to—talk?"

"They might use a soft rope."

"How about Toland?" called the old man. "He looks like a good talker—and he'd know all the answers."

Horace Toland's cold nerve had always been evident at the gambling table, but this wasn't for money now. No one put a hand on him, nor made any effort to stop him.

"I—I never killed anybody!" he

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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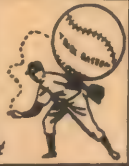

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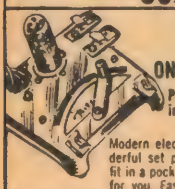

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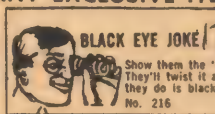

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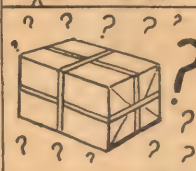

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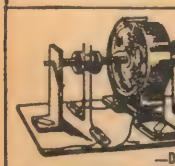

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panted. "I swear it—I tell you! Dick killed Wylie—shot Frank Blair. Dick wanted Susie Ronson. He misbranded Loughran's calves—to implicate Steve."

"Shut up, you yellow coyote!" choked Romaine.

Suddenly Horace Toland whirled and started running across the street toward the Ghost Tree Saloon, one hand under his flaring coat.

"Stop him!" yelled Loughran, and several of them ran after Toland, who

[*Turn To Page* 98]

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF

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LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 5th day of October, 1956.
(My commission expires March 30, 1958.)

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whirled at the door to the saloon, gun in hand, as he backed through the doorway and closed the door.

As more men started over there, from inside the saloon came the muffled thud of a pistol shot. One of the men went to the door, opened it cautiously and looked inside. Then he closed the door and came back, went to Romaine, who was still alive.

"Toland shot himself," said the man quietly.

The sheriff came out, looking down at Dick Romaine.

"Where is the money you took from the bank last night?" he asked. "You can't use it now."

"My ranch-house," whispered Romaine. "Loose board...under...bed. Harper...wasn't—" He tried to take a deep breath. "He...wasn't...in...on ...it."

"So you double-crossed Harper, tried to kill Harper, and take it all for yourself, eh?"

Romaine stared up at the sheriff. "Maybe...I—I wanted to send... Steve...away...."

Clint Loughran stepped over to Steve and held out his hand. Neither of them spoke but their hands gripped.

"Steve," said the sheriff, "after what we know now, it won't be hard to prove that the bank got your ranch through fraud. You'll get it back—with a gold mine as interest."

Susie was halfway out in the street, and Steve went to her.

"I had a quarrel with Dick yesterday," she whispered. "I gave him back his ring, and he—he made me give back that silver pin—the one you—you were interested in. I didn't know what it meant, Steve."

"It's all right, Susie," he said. "Everything is all right."

They walked over to the old man in the wheelchair. He and Steve looked closely at each other, but neither spoke.

"Mother is making some more apple pies," said Susie. "I—I wondered..."

Steve nodded, his eyes on Susie. "I sure do," he whispered.

Jim Morgan came out of the office and handed Steve's gun back to him—the gun they found on the bank floor.

"Here's your gun—again, Steve."

"Thanks again, Jim."

Susie and the sheriff stood there together, watching Steve pushing the old man in the wheelchair, back toward the old shack.

"He's wonderful," whispered Susie. "Just wonderful."

"He sure is," agreed the sheriff heartily. "Wonderful. Why, that old coot is the best actor I've ever heard."

Susie looked blankly at the sheriff, turned and headed for her job at the post-office.

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